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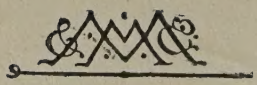
ENGLISH MEN OF LETTERS

WILLIAM MORRIS



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ENGLISH MEN OF LETTERS

WILLIAM MORRIS

BY

ALFRED NOYES

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PREFATORY NOTE

I HAVE to thank many friends of William Morris, and some of his most intimate friends, for the kind help they have given me in attempting to suggest the portrait of so many-sided a man. The essential factor in all the branches of his activity was undoubtedly the poetic spirit in him. In all things he was a poet—in words, in tapestry, in socialism; and, by regarding him primarily as a poet, according to the scope of a volume in this series, it is possible to preserve the right unity of impression. It would have been easy to load the book with an imposing bulk of irrelevant letters and anecdotes. But it is hoped that economy of the reader's attention will be counted in this case for a virtue. Even Mr. Mackail has blurred the effect of his invaluable biography of Morris by irrelevancies. One really fails to understand the lapse of so careful and scholarly a writer into an elaborate comparison between William Morris and Dr. Samuel Johnson—a comparison, a suggested close likeness, not a contrast! It not only blurs the picture, but with many of Morris's old friends is simply a matter for unmixed mirth. A minor instance of the same tendency to blur the picture is the citation of Miss Charlotte M. Yonge, by the same writer, as a potent influence upon Morris at the time when he was

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evolving his passionate early Arthurian dreams. No matter what authority there may be for such a suggestion, it would be out of proportion except in a biography large enough to estimate also the exact influence upon him of Bradshaw's Railway Guide.

Too little is better, and infinitely more suggestive, than too much of these details, just as the indication of a curve or a line in a drawing will be completed by the eye more satisfactorily than a network of "niggling." "Wha's yon? Wha's yon?" exclaimed a Scotch verger (in a dialect which I cannot represent), as Morris entered his church. "Wha's yon?" and he violently shook the sleeve of the minister who had brought Morris to look at the building. "Canna ye tell me? Yon's not an ordeenary man! Yon's not an ordeenary man!" The verger had, at any rate, the right *flair*; and his brief instinctive testimony to the notability of the illogical, impetuous, idealistic, sensuous, and fiery being who walked as if the whole world belonged to him, and carried the head of a Viking on his burly, blue-clad, seamanly, middle-sized figure—is it not the best criticism possible, unless the essential man can be discerned "behind all hindrance" in the poetry (corrected or verified here and there by external evidence) which was the fullest expression of his real self?

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CHAPTER I

EARLY YEARS

WILLIAM MORRIS was born at Elm House, Walthamstow, on the 24th of March 1834. The Morrises were of Welsh origin. His grandfather was the first of the family to drop the Welsh Ap from his name. His father, a bill and discount broker, married Emma Shelton, the daughter of a music-teacher in Worcester. Their first two children were girls. William was the eldest son, and there were six younger children. When he was six years old the Morrises left Elm House for Woodford Hall, on the other side of Epping Forest. It is a happy chance that his whole childhood may be seen at a glance, as on a single splendid fragment of his own romance-empurpled tapestry. About the year 1841, any one wandering near Woodford Hall, within sight of the Thames with its "white and ruddy-brown sails moving among corn-fields," might have been surprised by the vision of a curly haired young knight in glittering armour, riding through the strange glades of hornbeam on one of Titania's palfreys—a pony such as in Fairyland might have been "tethered to a poppy or stabled in a tree." But here, in broad noon, it was pacing proudly beneath

a greaved and breastplated young warrior from Joyous Gard, a child-champion shining through the fairy fringes of that sunny nook of unspoilt England, like some virgin star through the branches of Broceliande, in quest of the "beauty folded up in forests old." The small knight-errant was, of course, no ghost of Galahad or Percivale, but the future poet of *The Earthly Paradise*, and his age was about seven summers.

The prosaic explanation of all this is that a toy suit of armour had been given to him; but as he made such use of it in rides about Epping Forest, we may safely assume that he was not loth to receive it; and, indeed, it seems the natural outcome, the glittering crystallisation of all the other external facts and features of his childhood's kingdom—that wonderful Wood beyond our World's End which can be entered only upon the wings of poetry, but can never even be approached along the crawling highways of reason.

An examination of Morris's early life really does help to establish what one may call the spiritual continuity of it; and to show, for instance, that Mr. Swinburne was justified in saying of Morris's first volume of poems, produced as it was under the dominating and imminent wing of his elder friend Rossetti:

> It seems to have been now lauded and now decried as the result and expression of a school rather than a man, of a theory or tradition than a poet. . . . Those who so judged were blind guides. Such things as were in this book are taught and learnt in no school but that of instinct. Upon no piece of work in the world was the impress of native character ever more distinctly stamped, more deeply branded.

The authorised biography tells us unreservedly that

at the age of four William Morris had been deep in the Waverley Novels. Probably this means that he liked looking at pictures under the mulberry tree that leant along the lawn at Elm House; and, in such a case, those who know childhood best and those who remember Morris's later work best will alike find it difficult to decide whether the printed words or the leaf-shadows that dappled the page made the deeper additional impression on his mind. At any rate he was a bad speller at a much later age, and he delighted throughout his boyhood in crude ghost-stories; so that he is not to be regarded as an infant prodigy with a fine taste in literature, but simply as an imaginative child who happened, among other adventures, to follow some enchanting title like *Redgauntlet* or *The Black Dwarf* through a polysyllabic wilderness. The long words would become dark spaces and forest-aisles to be peopled by his imagination, with the help not only perhaps of illustrations, but also of the butterflies and flower-beds beyond the book, in a way that no grown-up reasoning can follow. However, he must often have chanced upon some monosyllabic clash of swords or sudden flash of armour through the tangled thickets of his dream-empurpled pilgrimage.

That the environment of his later childhood at Woodford Hall influenced Morris's subsequent work profoundly is beyond doubt. The self-contained mediæval system of the house, and the old festivals that it observed, must have meant a good deal to the youngster who came to make it his playground. Twelfth Night was one of the great occasions of the year at Woodford Hall, and "the masque of St. George was always then presented with

considerable elaboration." The influence of this pervades Morris's first volume, and perhaps even the later work, *Love is Enough.* It is probably not too fanciful to say that some of the peculiarly vivid hunting, roasting, and feasting passages in *Jason* and the early part of *Sigurd the Volsung* derive some of their glamour from that early proximity of Epping Forest, and the fact that, as a child, William Morris was allowed to roast the rabbits and fieldfares he shot for his own supper. It was an affair of the imagination even in those earliest days; for we are told that his great ambition was to shoot his game with bow and arrows, which is, as his later critics would say more gravely, "to take up the dropped threads of the mediæval tradition."

Another and perhaps a more important fact is that Morris's father had a great liking for the old churches in the neighbourhood, with their monuments and brasses, and that his young son used to accompany him on visits to them. When he was eight years old, William Morris was taken to see Canterbury. On the same holiday he saw the church of Minster in Thanet, and it is said that fifty years later, never having seen it in the interval, he described the church in some detail from that memory. "Gothic architecture" could have been little more than a romantic phrase to him at that age. Yet one may conceive that if his father really loved it and spoke simply to him about it, a spire might seem more like a soaring prayer than anything built with hands, even to so young a child. At any rate the glorious impression that the individual scenes left upon him is indubitable. It must be remembered that they meant, at the very least, great pillars, dark aisles, stained glass,

and dim rich streaming lights over cold mysterious tombs. It must be remembered that they meant curious inscriptions and strange recumbent figures in eternal armour, with frozen swords and stark upturned feet. The memory of it certainly survives in the Guenevere volume, and gives it much of its atmosphere. It is curious, for instance, how the dumb stone of King Arthur's tomb seems to make almost a third character in that wonderful interview between Launcelot and Guenevere. The tomb itself is hardly mentioned, but the reader gradually gets an almost physical realisation of its palpable and stony presence. To write some of the poems in that book it was certainly necessary for the author to be one who had realised what stone surfaces and tombs are, as children realise them, and make friends with them, physically, by wandering amongst them, touching them, and finding here that they are ice-cold in the shadows, or there that they are warm in the sun.

Blent with other and later influences, too, there are distinct traces throughout that book of the influence of these early scenes, in a certain lapidary quality in the style. There is no poem in English—many as there are dealing directly with the subject—that gives what one may call the sense of tombs in the way that *The Chapel in Lyoness* gives it, though here the subject is not directly mentioned at all. And though it was in later years that Morris acquired his knowledge, it was probably his childhood's vivid sense-impressions that gave the glamour to the images passing through his mind when he wrote:

> Edward the King is dead, at Westminster
> The carvers smooth the curls of his long beard.

At any rate, though this atmosphere which pervades the whole of Morris's first volume may be said to belong to the Pre-Raphaelite manner, it belongs also to a region which the other Pre-Raphaelite poets left comparatively unexplored—a region into which it may quite fairly be said that Morris first wandered in his own childhood, and apart from any influence but that of his own father.

It is hardly possible to exaggerate the value of what one may call early sense-impressions to the maturer mind of the artist, wherein very often they seem to remain as a kind of unconscious fount and source from which he is able to draw certain mysterious details of atmosphere, wonder, or fragrance—details that hardly touch the adult observer, yet in the work itself often make all the difference between platitude and what is called "inspiration"; all the difference between mere poetic or flowery stylism and that simple confronting of elemental and essential mysteries which, without effort, sees everything under "the light that never was on sea or land" and is called "poetry." These early impressions do not always tally with the child's ordinary environment. A childhood spent in London might—as in the case of Dickens, or, in a subtler way, Rossetti—impress the child chiefly with smells of river-mud, or glimpses of human faces and the human drama, or the sensuous aspects of human life; and yet, on the other hand, its most glorious source of spiritual wealth might be the memory of a holiday spent in crawling through a jungle of golden grass, or, like a glimpse of some previous existence, some keen sweet smell of wild herbs in a wood. In some cases, like that of

Rossetti, the mental harvest and the environment do tally. The country to Rossetti, reversing the experience of his own heroine, was always "far off, like a child's tale." His aloofness from nature, in that sense, has a London childhood written all over it. Morris, on the other hand, has Woodford Hall and the Thames country for the germinating centre of all his work. It has been said that his sea-pictures in verse are the best that can be painted from the shore. One might say with greater truth that they are the best that can be painted from a boat on the upper Thames. The water, the ripples, even the green waves in them, smack of the Thames. They never taste salt, never sting the cheek. The hornbeams that grew round Woodford Hall are not common in England, but they are very plentiful in the work of William Morris; and it is worth while noting the mystery they always have for him, as in the poem called *Shameful Death*:

> He did not strike one blow,
> For the recreants came behind,
> In a place where the hornbeams grow,
> A path right hard to find,
> For the hornbeam boughs swing so,
> That the twilight makes it blind.

In the childhood, too, of most impressionable people there are usually one or two moments, events, or landmarks of which the memory is as peculiarly and particularly vivid throughout the whole of their lives as were the footprints on the sand in *Robinson Crusoe*. It is probable, for instance, that Stevenson in his childhood had been tremendously impressed, and perhaps terrified, by some blind beggar with a tapping stick

like those that appear in *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped*. However that may be, there are two early imprints upon the mind of William Morris that probably—taken with the rest of his early environment—would count for quite as much in determining his choice of the Middle Ages for his "form of style" as any later influence. One of these is the fact that, when he lived at Woodford Hall, there were stocks and a cage there on a bit of wayside green in the middle of the village; and he himself has said, in a letter to his daughter, that he used to regard them with considerable terror, and decidedly preferred to walk on the other side of the road. There is not the slightest doubt that this early and imaginative dread is responsible for the extraordinarily vivid sense of terror, with regard to such instruments, which he displays in *Sir Peter Harpdon's End*. The second of these footprints on the sand he has recorded in his *Lecture on the Lesser Arts of Life*:

> Well I remember as a boy my first acquaintance with a room hung with faded greenery at Queen Elizabeth's Lodge, by Chingford Hatch, in Epping Forest, and the impression of romance that it made upon me! a feeling that always comes back to me when I read Sir Walter Scott's *Antiquary* and come to the description of the Green Room at Monkbarns, amongst which the novelist has with such exquisite cunning of art embedded the fresh and glittering verses of the summer poet Chaucer; yes, that was more than upholstery, believe me.

It is possible that here we have Morris's first little private gateway into the greenwoods of Chaucer. At any rate it is quite obvious that all his adventures were really his own, and that he made his own discoveries of beauty as he went along his own winding path. Many

of the designs in the flower-work of his earlier wall-papers were suggested by the beautiful drawings in Gerard's *Herbal* which he studied as a young naturalist at Woodford Hall. Not only were his sense-perceptions extremely acute, but his memory of them and all their associations was extraordinary. "To this day," he said in his later years, "when I smell a may-tree I think of going to bed by daylight."

Morris's father died in 1847, and in February 1848 the boy was entered at Marlborough College, the surroundings of which are as beautiful and as full of historic romance as the neighbourhood of Epping Forest. Perhaps fortunately for a youngster of Morris's peculiar temperament and genius, the discipline at Marlborough in those days was very loose and the boys had much greater individual freedom than now exists at any public school. He was the better enabled to "gang his ain gait" by his own physical strength and powerful individuality, and he seems to have chosen a somewhat solitary life. To a certain extent he was unboyish and took no part in the ordinary school games. How he preferred to spend his spare time may be gathered from a letter to his sister, which, except for the absence of punctuation, is by no means like that of a schoolboy of fifteen. After elaborately describing an anthem that he had heard on Easter Tuesday (with more interest in its structural beauty, we may note, than in its subject), he says :

> On Monday I went to Silbury Hill which I think I have told you before is an artificial hill made by the Britons but first I went to a place called Abury where there is a Druidical circle and a Roman entrenchment both which

encircle the town; originally it is supposed that the stones were in this shape; first one large circle then a smaller one inside this, and then one in the middle for an altar, but a great many, in fact most, of the stones have been removed so I could not tell this. On Tuesday morning I was told of this so I thought I would go there again, I did and then I was able to understand how they had been fixed; I think the biggest stone I could see had about 16 feet out of the ground in height and about 10 feet thick and 12 feet broad the circle and entrenchment altogether is about half a mile; at Abury I also saw a very old church the tower was very pretty indeed it had four little spires on it of the decorated order, and there was a little Porch and inside the porch a beautiful Norman doorway loaded with mouldings, the chancel was new and was paved with tesselated pavement; this I saw through the window.

He then describes at some length what a water-meadow is and how he went through one up to his knees in water, and had experiences which were probably recalled when he was writing such poems as as *The Haystack in the Floods.*

He read widely while at Marlborough, and delved into many books on archæology and architecture which he found in the school library. The school had a High Church tendency and the influence of the Anglo-Catholic movement was then just beginning to be felt there strongly. They had a trained choir which initiated Morris into the beauties of the older church music and deepened his interest in what one may call ecclesiastical art. It has been said that he left Marlborough a pronounced Anglo-Catholic; but it would probably be truer to say that he left Marlborough an artist with Anglo-Catholicism as one of his temporary foot-bridges to beauty.

In 1848 the family removed from Woodford Hall to

Water House, Walthamstow, which latter place served to deepen the boy's peculiar love of nature and strengthen his peculiar manner of feeling it.

The house was of the same general type as Woodford Hall, on a slightly smaller scale. Its principal feature was a great square hall paved with marble flags, from which a broad square staircase, floored and wainscotted with Spanish chestnut, led up to a large upper hall or gallery. In one of the window seats there he used to spend whole days reading, both before and after he went to Oxford. Behind the house was a broad lawn, and beyond it the feature which gave the house its name, a moat of some forty feet in breadth, surrounding an island planted with a grove of aspens. The moat was stocked with pike and perch; there the boys fished, bathed, and boated in summer, and skated in winter. The island, rough and thickly wooded and fringed with a growth of hollies, hawthorns, and chestnuts, was a sort of fairyland for all the children, who almost lived on it.

In 1852, after a year's reading with a private tutor, Morris went up to Exeter College, Oxford, for the matriculation examination. He entered into residence there in the Lent Term of 1853. At the examination in the Hall of Exeter it is said that the boy sitting next to him, who had come up for the same purpose, was Edward Burne-Jones. Never was there a more fitting environment than Oxford for two such natures. The beautiful mediæval city, that "vision of grey-roofed houses and a long winding street and the sound of many bells," was an ideal nursery for their dreams. The authorised biography of Morris speaks somewhat unfavourably and hastily in this regard. "Still," it says, "the Oxford of 1853 breathed from its towers the last enchantments of the Middle Ages; and still it

offered to its most ardent disciples, who came to it as to some miraculous place, full of youthful enthusiasm, thirsting after knowledge and beauty, the stony welcome that Gibbon had found at Magdalen, that Shelley had found at University, in the days of the ancient order." The biographer hastens to complain of the looseness of the University discipline as readily as he approved of the same fact at Marlborough; and at any rate it may be noted in passing that the satirical description of an average college lecture, which apparently forms part of his criticism of the internal condition of Exeter, was actually written of Pembroke. It is conventional but really somewhat late in the day to talk of these schoolboy collisions with authority as if they were Promethean martyrdoms. Whatever the university system might be, schoolboy geniuses would always be in revolt against it; and to say that Morris "never got over" his treatment at Oxford is to indicate a fault in Morris rather than in the University. Whether he got over it or not, Exeter College secured an important piece of his work for its own chapel and gave it such a place of honour as any artist might be proud to occupy. If it be true that Morris to the end of his life remained bitterly prejudiced against the intellectual life and educational system of modern Oxford, it is certainly a fact that the Oxford life was the best thing in the world for him. The surroundings, the cloistered life, the liberty, the friendships with such kindred spirits as Burne-Jones and, later, Mr. Swinburne; the long talks and debates about art and literature, even the boating expeditions along the "lonely, far-off mother of the Thames," played their great part in making him all

that he became. Whether he knew it or not, Oxford—which was at least unacademic enough to offer him its professorship of poetry—was always the home of his art. It is there that his work has struck deepest root. It is there that generation after generation of undergraduates reads the *Defence of Guenevere*, and covers its walls with reproductions of his work and that of Burne-Jones. Oxford, which after all must have a system, could do little more than it actually did in the way of sympathy and encouragement. If he were an exceptional youth—of a kind not known before—the distinction was only purchased by the fact that the masses of men are not exceptional. Oxford not only provided him with an occasional narrow-minded Don who served those masses very well, but she also gave him the painted manuscripts in the Bodleian, gave him Merton Tower and introduced him to Ruskin. If he wanted exceptional spiritual guidance—which is apparently the ground of his complaint—it was an error on his part to feel bitterly prejudiced because he could only get it in an exceptional way and from exceptional men. Get it he did, and in an intensely stimulating fashion that would have been impossible elsewhere. Canon Dixon, another of Morris's Oxford friends and himself a writer of some fine verse, has described the Tennysonian enthusiasm which prevailed at that time in Oxford and the world:

> All reading men were Tennysonians; all sets of reading men talked poetry. Poetry was the thing; and it was felt with justice that this was due to Tennyson, Tennyson had invented a new poetry, a new poetic English; his use of words was new, and every piece that he wrote was the conquest of a new region.

Morris and his friends were wont to gather together in one another's rooms for the purpose of reading Tennyson, Milton, Ruskin, and Shakespeare aloud. "We all had the feeling," says Canon Dixon, "that after Tennyson no farther development was possible: that we were at the end of all things in poetry."

For the most part, Morris spent his vacations in going about to see churches in England and in France. His first journey abroad was made in 1854, to the North of France and to Belgium. He became acquainted with many masterpieces of painting, and also with the churches of Amiens, Beauvais, and Chartres, which, says Canon Dixon, "he considered the noblest works of human invention."

Upon coming of age he acquired the control of an income of £900 a year, a fact which enabled him safely to occupy himself only with what interested him, though he had never really done anything else. Just as the French Revolution kindled dreams of social regeneration among the participators in the earlier Romantic movement, so now the Crimean War—in a minor way—set many hearts afire. Many of the young Oxford men of that time might in all sincerity have echoed Wordsworth's cry:

> Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
> But to be young was very heaven.

Tennyson published *Maud* in 1855, and it is a striking illustration of the social ferment of the time. The spirit of Darwin was brooding over the intellectual world. Creeds and systems were going more completely into the intellectual melting-pot than ever they had done before in England. Nothing was a very sure

refuge for the minds of the younger men—and especially of the younger poets—but the beauty of the visible world as revealed and made enduring in art. The visible world itself was to be their sacramental wine and bread, their means of communion with the Unseen. Ruskin was the prophet of the new religion, "the religion of beauty." We noted above that Morris has been described as a High Churchman and Neo-Catholic when he came up to Oxford; but it may very confidently be affirmed that it was the religion of beauty rather than the beauty of any one particular religion or creed that appealed to him. It is the religion of beauty that is voiced in those remarkable verses which he sent about this time in a letter to Cormell Price. It is interesting to compare them, for instance, with the earnest questioning of *In Memoriam*, on the one hand, and the acquiescence of Newman on the other. From one point of view Morris seems to end where the religion of the priest begins. He really ignores the priest to whom he declares he is listening, and—like all poets—he finds his religion (perhaps without knowing it) much nearer than any creed could bring it to him. From another point of view, Morris begins where the priest ends. He is regarding certain earthly details as Wordsworth regarded earthly sunsets and daisies, and every detail has a sacramental value:

'Twas in Church on Palm Sunday,
Listening what the priest did say
Of the kiss that did betray,

That the thought did come to me
How the olives used to be
Growing in Gethsemane;

That the thoughts upon me came
Of the lantern's steady flame,
Of the softly whispered name ;

Of how kiss and words did sound
While the olives stood around,
While the robe lay on the ground.

Canon Dixon has described the discovery of Morris as a poet.

One night Crom Price and I went to Exeter and found him with Burne-Jones. As soon as we entered the room, Burne-Jones exclaimed wildly, "He's a big poet!" "Who is?" asked we. "Why, Topsy!"

This was the name Burne-Jones had given Morris from his dark mass of very thick curly hair. Thereupon Morris read his first poem, *The Willow and the Red Cliff*—a poem which has not survived, but apparently made a very strong impression on its hearers as something very original, new, and strikingly beautiful. They all expressed their admiration, and Morris remarked, "Well, if this is poetry, it is very easy to write." "Thereafter," says Canon Dixon, "for a term or two he came to my rooms almost every day with a new poem." Many of these poems (some of which appear later in his first volume), together with some striking little efforts at prose romance, which might almost have been written by some mediæval Edgar Allan Poe, were printed in the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, which Morris and his friends founded in 1856. Like most University periodicals it only survived for twelve months, though it received the good wishes of Tennyson and three of Rossetti's finest poems appeared in it—*Nineveh*, *The Blessed Damozel*, and *The Staff and Scrip*.

CHAPTER II

'THE DEFENCE OF GUENEVERE'

EARLY in 1857, Rossetti wrote in an extremely remarkable letter to a friend:

Two young men, projectors of *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine,* have secretly come to town also from Oxford, and are now very intimate friends of mine. Their names are Morris and Jones. They have turned artists instead of taking up any other career to which the University generally leads, and both are men of real genius. Jones's designs are marvels of finish and imaginative detail, unequalled by anything unless perhaps Albert Dürer's finest works; and Morris, though without practice as yet, has no less power, I fancy. He has written some really wonderful poetry, too.

Later in the same year, Rossetti wrote again:

Morris has as yet done nothing in art, but is now busily painting his first picture, "Sir Tristram after his Illness, in the Garden of King Mark's Palace, recognised by the Dog he had given to Yseult, from the *Morte D'Arthur.*" It is being done all from nature, of course, and I believe will turn out capitally.

The lengthily named picture fell short of the hope of both the artist and his friends, and Rossetti afterwards came to believe that Morris's abilities in this direction were those of a decorative artist rather than of a painter

of pictures in the ordinary sense of the words. An interesting side-light is here thrown on Morris's gusty sense of humour (a sense which those only acquainted with his published work have often justifiably supposed to be lacking in him, though it was often present, as a sort of reaction, to an uproarious degree). Rossetti recounts how, a little later, on entering his friend's studio, he saw a grotesque parody of the ambitious "masterpiece," reworded thus:

> "Sudden Indisposition of Sir Tristram, in the Garden of King Mark's Palace, recognisable as Collywobbles by the pile of gooseberry skins beside him, remains of the unripe gooseberries devoured by him while he was waiting for Yseult."

In 1857 Morris returned to Oxford with Burne-Jones and Rossetti to decorate the walls of the Oxford Union Debating-Hall. This now famous scheme resulted rather disastrously, for before long the mural decorations began rapidly to fade. "I've come to my Oxford Union" was at one time a colloquialism among the Rossetti-Morris circle for the vanishing point in worldly means. The subjects of the "frescoes" were legends from the Arthurian cycle; and there is no doubt, of course, that to Morris's preoccupation with the central subject, and to Rossetti's enthusiastic mediævalism, we owe a great deal of the wonderful atmosphere and colour of *The Defence of Guenevere*, that remarkable first volume of poems which appeared in 1858.

From the point of view which is mainly concerned with the career of Morris himself, the Oxford Union episode is chiefly of interest in that it brought Morris into still more intimate relations with the Pre-Raphaelite

artists who helped to execute the work. Rossetti, Burne-Jones, Hughes, Spencer Stanhope, Val Prinsep, Hungerford Pollen; and also with Mr. Swinburne, who had come up to Balliol in 1856, and had, of course, an equally great enthusiasm for the Arthurian legends. The fact that Morris's head was often in demand as a model for that of Sir Tristram or Sir Lancelot, and that the forest of sunflowers behind which the head of Mr. Swinburne was painted is practically all that now survives of the decorations, is hardly of more importance than the glimpse we get in one of Burne-Jones's letters of the violent temper which the child in glittering armour had by this time developed. The "child-heart," as Morris and some of his friends called it, became perhaps a somewhat conscious possession of their manhood. Yet in the case of Morris there is no doubt that he did possess it to the end of his life; and his fits of temper were as quickly over and as easily provoked as those of a child. The reappearance of the child in armour has an interest of its own as described by Burne-Jones:

> For the purpose of our drawing we often needed armour, and of a date and design so remote that no examples existed for our use. Therefore Morris, whose knowledge of all these things seemed to have been born in him, and who never, at any time, needed books of reference for anything, set to work to make designs for an ancient kind of helmet called a basinet, and for a great surcoat of ringed mail with a hood of mail and the skirt coming below the knees. These were made for him by a stout little smith who had a forge near the Castle. Morris's visits to the forge were daily, but what scenes happened there we shall never know. The encounters between these two workmen were always stubborn and angry as far as I could see. One afternoon

when I was working high up at my picture, I heard a strange bellowing in the building, and turning round to find the cause, saw an unwonted sight. The basinet was being tried on, but the visor, for some reason, would not lift, and I saw Morris, embedded in iron, dancing with rage and roaring inside. The mail-coat came in due time, and was so satisfactory to its designer that the first day it came he chose to dine in it. It became him well; he looked very splendid.

We are also told how his friend Price sat to him for a clay head which he was modelling, and how it was never finished, because whenever Morris grew impatient he flew at it and smashed it up. But though Morris did display this pleasantly childish lack of philosophic calm, a great deal of legendary nonsense has grown up around it, and has even been sanctioned by the authorised biography. Mr. Mackail relates the following story of the same period quite gravely and in perfect good faith:—

> At dinner one evening in George Street, Prinsep said something, whether intentionally or not, which offended Morris. Every one expected an outburst of fury. *But by a prodigious effort of self-control Morris swallowed his anger, and only bit his fork—one of the common four-pronged fiddle-pattern kind—which was crushed and twisted about almost beyond recognition.*

On another occasion we are solemnly told that in a fit of rage he bit through a solid oak window-frame! These stories were simply the humorous exaggerations of his high-spirited young friends at the time. Morris being so much of a child, was almost necessarily one of those lovable personalities who are destined to be the butt of their friends to a certain extent; and this he certainly was, especially of Rossetti, who none the less

recognised his real greatness. Even Morris's melancholy pre-occupation with the subject of death was a source of mirth to his friends, who asserted that it was due to his "fear of going to hell." From the time when, sarcastically commenting on the profusion of sunflowers with which Morris had covered the foreground of his Union picture, Rossetti suggested that he should help the other painters out of difficulties by filling up their foregrounds with scarlet-runners—from that time to the publication of *Sigurd the Volsung*, when Rossetti, with a flash of his old humour, deliberately goaded Morris into fury by declaring he could really take no interest in a man whose grandfather was a dragon, Morris was continually "having his leg pulled," and in many cases we fear his biographer's leg has also been given a surreptitious tug. At any rate we have it on the authority of one of Morris's most intimate friends that Rossetti coined many of the wild myths that are circulated about "Topsy's" behaviour in moments of emotion.

During these months in Oxford were written the four chief poems which open the volume he published in the following year, 1858. *The Defence of Guenevere* roused very little interest in the literary world at large, and its sale was exceedingly small, even for a volume of poetry. To a certain extent the public indifference was justifiable. Taken by themselves, at a time when Tennyson was placing exquisitely lucid, because exquisitely constructed, poems before the reading world, those vague and somewhat chaotic mediæval scraps of wind-music, *The Blue Closet*, *Golden Wings*, and *Two Red Roses across the Moon*, certainly contained nothing of very great intrinsic importance either to artists or to

thinkers. It is only later that we are able to see their significance. It is only when we have read *Jason* and *The Earthly Paradise*, or at least have become citizens of the world which all Morris's books have helped to create for us, that we have the smallest right to turn back to *The Defence of Guenevere* as in some ways one of the sweetest flowers of Morris's work. Had it been welcomed enthusiastically on its first appearance it could only have been on false grounds. The atmosphere had not yet been created in which it could live and breathe naturally. There was, however, during the inevitable reaction against the overpowering weight and splendour of Tennyson's work, a kind of artistic snobbery abroad which would vaguely proclaim Morris's first little book to be a mysterious revelation of some one true Church of Arthurianism unknown to the greater poet's more mundane mind. How false that is and how ungrateful, Morris (who, at that period certainly, looked upon Tennyson as a supreme master) would have been the first to protest. Mr. Mackail, too much a master of his subject to attempt the exaltation of Morris at the expense of Tennyson, unfortunately seems by one or two remarks to support those who would adopt this quite false and quite unnecessary method of criticism. Morris recognised the limitations of Tennyson, said Canon Dixon. It would be far truer to say that Morris was quite unaware of the breadth of Tennyson; and it is a curious fact that the poems of Tennyson which he admired most are those which Tennyson himself felt to be most juvenile, and in some cases actually omitted from his collected works. The influence of poems like *Oriana* and *The Sisters* is very marked in some of the poems of Morris's first

volume, while a certain early Tennysonian refrain blends almost perfectly with some of the music of Morris's *Chapel in Lyoness*:

> With inward sigh I see the sun
> Fade off the pillars one by one,
> My heart faints when the day is done,
> Looking down to Camelot.
>
> Sometimes strange thoughts pass through my head;
> Not like a tomb is this my bed,
> Yet oft I think that I am dead:
> The Lady of Shalott.

Morris's debt to Tennyson, in fact, is an immense one; and it does not in the least detract from his greatness or even his originality that this should be so, any more than would the debt of a son to a father. But the fact remains that the man who wrote *In Memoriam*, the *Ballad of the Revenge*, the great *Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington*, the *Northern Farmer*, and *The Princess*, had a range of which Morris was unaware altogether. Writing out of a full-hearted admiration and enthusiasm for the work of Morris, it seems at the outset more than ever necessary for us to emphasise this. No doubt Tennyson wrote some bad poetry; but let us reverse the methods of his critics, and take Morris's description of the lady who, having made the acquaintance of Rossetti,

> lived in a hall,
> Large in the eyes, and slim and tall;
> And ever she sung from noon to noon,
> *Two red roses across the moon*;

let us compare that description with the solemn swell of Tennyson's majestic *Morte D'Arthur*:

So all day long the noise of battle roll'd
Among the mountains by the winter sea;
Until King Arthur's table, man by man,
Had fallen in Lyonesse about their Lord,
King Arthur: *then, because his wound was deep,*
The bold Sir Bedivere uplifted him,
And bore him to a chapel nigh the field,
A broken chancel with a broken cross,
That stood on a dark strait of barren land.
On one side lay the Ocean, and on one
Lay a great water, and the moon was full.

The august simplicity of passages like that was now and always beyond the reach of Morris, as also was the marvellous resource of the rolling organ-music of Tennyson's verse, exemplified in that sudden glorious change in the rhythmic beat where indeed one knows not the speech from the thought, the body from the soul of the poem, so perfectly are they wedded.

The old order changeth, yielding place to new.

And that, of course, is the whole philosophy of the matter. Morris's poetry was of a new order, and very thankful we may be for its advent, lest "one good custom" should have corrupted the world. Some of the poems in *The Defence of Guenevere* have merits which certainly do not depend on adverse criticism of other poets. The feverish wanderings of the half-distraught queen's speech could not have been rendered more faithfully than in that curiously-wrought piece of *terza rima*, with its overlapping lines and rhymes so unexpected that at first sight they appear rambling and bungling. If there is any better fighting poetry than some of this, it must be far to seek:—

"Did you see Mellyagraunce
When Launcelot stood by him? what white fear

"Curdled his blood, and how his teeth did dance,
His side sink in? as my knight cried and said,
'Slayer of unarm'd men, here is a chance!

"'Setter of traps, I pray you guard your head,
By God I am so glad to fight with you,
Stripper of ladies; that my hand feels lead

"'For driving weight; hurrah now! draw and do,
For all my wounds are moving in my breast,
And I am getting mad with waiting so.'"

King Arthur's Tomb is an even finer piece of work, more lucid, richer in colour, and even more turbulent in passion, while its theme is a deeper one. It shows very clearly the influence of Morris's studies of painting about this time:

"And every morn I scarce could pray at all,
For Launcelot's red-golden hair would play,
Instead of sunlight, on the painted wall,
Mingled with dreams of what the priest did say;

"Grim curses out of Peter and of Paul;
Judging of strange sins in Leviticus;
Another sort of writing on the wall,
Scored deep across the painted heads of us.

"Christ sitting with the woman at the well,
And Mary Magdalen repenting there,
Her dimmed eyes scorch'd and red at sight of hell
So hardly scaped, no gold light on her hair."

Wonderful lines are those, too, in which Guenevere recalls the fair old days to Launcelot, with Arthur's tomb between them—recalls the singing of the thrushes in the lonely garden, and the clanging of arms about the joyous pavilions:

"There, as I well know,

"Rode Launcelot, the king of all the band,
And scowling Gauwaine, like the night in day,

And handsome Gareth, with his great white hand
Curl'd round the helm-crest, ere he join'd the fray;

"And merry Dinadan with sharp dark face,
All true knights loved to see."

Here surely, too, one sees the influence of his studies in painting, translated into another art. But in the magnificent picture of the tourney that follows there is something of the red wine of battle that is only to be drunk out of the inverted helmets of heroic poetry—a wine, moreover, of a heady kind that is hardly to be found outside the poetry of Morris, unless it be that which they drink in Valhalla.

"O Palomydes," Guenevere cries, remembering the knight who fought with helmet off and face brushed by his red heavy swinging hair, a face fretted with useless care and bitter, useless striving after love—

"O Palomydes, with much honour bear
Beast Glatysaunt upon your shield, above

"Your helm that hides the swinging of your hair,
And think of Iseult, as your sword drives through
Much mail and plate—O God, let me be there
A little time, as I was long ago!

"Because stout Gareth lets his spear fall low,
Gauwaine and Launcelot, and Dinadan
Are helm'd and waiting; let the trumpets go!
Bend over, ladies, to see all you can!

"Clench teeth, dames, yea, clasp hands, for Gareth's spear
Throws Kay from out his saddle, like a stone
From a castle-window when the foe draws near—
'Iseult!'—Sir Dinadan rolleth overthrown.

"'Iseult'—again—the pieces of each spear
Fly fathoms up, and both the great steeds reel;

'Tristram for Iseult!' 'Iseult' and 'Guenevere,'
The ladies' names bite verily like steel.'"

And with what wonderful tragic force Morris makes this fierce memory of the distraught queen suddenly break into another complex grief and passion as she pours out her simple naked agony across the tomb to Launcelot:

"They bite—bite me, Lord God!—I shall go mad,
Or else die kissing him, he is so pale,
He thinks me mad already, O bad! bad!
Let me lie down a little while and wail."

"No longer so, rise up, I pray you, love,
And slay me really, then we shall be heal'd,
Perchance, in the aftertime by God above."
"Banner of Arthur—with black-bended shield

"Sinister-wise across the fair gold ground!
Here let me tell you what a knight you are,
O sword and shield of Arthur! you are found
A crooked sword, I think, that leaves a scar

"On the bearer's arm, so be he thinks it straight,
Twisted Malay's crease beautiful blue-grey,
Poisoned with sweet fruit; as he found too late,
My husband Arthur, on some bitter day!

"O sickle cutting hemlock the day long!
That the husbandman across his shoulder hangs,
And, going homeward about evensong,
Dies the next morning, struck through by the fangs!"

Mr. Swinburne in criticising this book gives noble and generous praise to its passion, emotional depth, and truth; but suggests that the craftsmanship is somewhat blundering in comparison. This is probably due to the fact that Morris aimed at something very different from

that which Mr. Swinburne achieved. We do not think Morris fell short of his aim. He never attempted to write lines "of their own arduous fulness reverent": he often deliberately ignored the aids to that fulness which are given by elision; and elision—Mr. Swinburne says—is a law, not a privilege, of English verse. But Morris aimed at an effect which he could only get by his own methods. His verses should be read slowly, almost syllable by syllable, with due regard to their childlike mediæval naïveté; and it is manifest that the curious overlapping of his lines, and the unexpected rhymes, which at first sight might seem to be induced by a schoolboyish difficulty in finding them, are really masterly artistic devices. Nothing could have rendered the feverish wanderings of Guenevere better than the "rambling" *terza rima* of the first poem; and what could better have suggested her almost inarticulate passion than the extraordinarily feminine "O bad! bad!" in the passage we have quoted above. Morris's art in these poems consisted not in the maintenance of the normal iambic pentameter, but in his subtle variations from it. If we compare a line like:

> The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,

or the way in which Gray maintains the regularity of the metrical beats throughout his elegy, with the way in which Morris departs from it in

> "Clench teeth, dames, yea, clasp hands, for Gareth's spear
> Throws Kay," etc.,

it is obvious that Morris does not err from mere lack of craftsmanship. We shall have more to say on this subject in another chapter; it is enough here to point

out that, while indicating the "norm" of his verses, he obtains his effects by subtle variations from it, only possible to a master of technique.

Galahad, a Christmas Mystery, has a mystic charm of its own; but in rebelling against the cold, exquisite, snowlike purity of Tennyson's conception Morris has not really drawn nearer to the mood of the Middle Ages, as some critics would suggest. He merely loses the theme and the type, and is really writing about Launcelot in his early youth, when he describes Galahad's meditations and regrets that he has no woman to throw her arms "warm and lithe around his neck," and so forth. *Sir Peter Harpdon's End* is perhaps the most powerful of the narrative poems suggested by Froissart; but *The Haystack in the Floods* and *Shameful Death* were more within his reach at the time, and are more satisfying. *Rapunzel* is, however, the most bewitching of all the poems in this book. Its elaborate metrical scheme is in itself a complete refutation of what has been said about Morris's lack of technique; and it is a most brilliantly successful voyage across the perilous sea that washes fairylands forlorn, full of delicate beauty and deliciously mediæval. Of the other poems, which we have described as "scraps of wind-music"—*The Blue Closet*, *The Tune of Seven Towers*, *Two Red Roses across the Moon*, and the *Praise of My Lady*—we can only say here what we said above. They are obscure trifles, often very artificial, immature, and imperfectly conceived. From a lyrical point of view the finest piece of music in the book is the pathetic and rapturous *Eve of Crecy*, where the refrain is for once perfectly "right," and never lapses into a parody of

itself. Very fine is that sudden outburst of the poor knight, musing before the great defeat on what the chance of victory may bring him—wealth and Marguerite. "If I were rich I would kiss her feet," he cries:

> Yet even now it is good to think,
> While my few poor varlets grumble and drink
> In my desolate hall, where the fires sink,—
> *Ah! qu'elle est belle La Marguerite.*
>
> Of Margaret sitting glorious there,
> In glory of gold and glory of hair,
> And glory of glorious face most fair;—
> *Ah! qu'elle est belle La Marguerite.*

CHAPTER III

MARRIAGE—THE RED HOUSE

After the publication of this volume, Morris still remained for the most part in his Oxford rooms, trying hard to make headway with his painting, but not very successfully. Through the negotiations of Rossetti, he sold a picture for £70, a small financial success such as did not by any means befall the far better poetic work in *The Defence of Guenevere*; but more and more he began to realise that he could not be a painter, and perhaps it was this sudden access of guineas that most ironically brought it home to him. More important than any artistic work he was doing at this time was another tie that bound him to Oxford. Some of the poems in his first volume could hardly have been written without experience of a certain personal kind. Rossetti and Burne-Jones in the Long Vacation of 1857 had seen two girls one night in the Oxford theatre. The elder of these was of a remarkable type of beauty. With the cheek of undergraduates and the enthusiasm of artists, they made the acquaintance of these girls, and found them to be daughters of Mr. Robert Burden of Holywell Street; and finally persuaded the elder to sit to Rossetti and his friends for

the work at the Union. Morris's admiration went further than the artistic view of her as a "type"; and soon after the appearance of *The Defence of Guenevere* Morris and Jane Burden became engaged. This is how the incident was described by one of their friends:—

> After the labours of the day, the volunteer artists of the Union regaled themselves by coming to the theatre, and there they beheld in the front box above them what all declared to be the ideal personification of poetical womanhood. In this case the hair was not auburn, but black as night; unique in face and figure, she was a queen, a Proserpine, a Medusa, a Circe—but also, strangely enough, a Beatrice, a Pandora, and a Virgin Mary. They made interest with the family, and she sat to them. Morris was at that time sworn to be a painter. She sat to him. . . .

For nearly half a century now her face has been familiar to the public through Rossetti's art. The poet-painter found in her his ideal of tragic beauty. His "Proserpine" is perhaps the finest example.

Morris's sojourn in Oxford was diversified by a few flying visits to his mother and to London, and once by an adventurous voyage (in one of Bossom's Oxford boats, which was sent over to Paris for the purpose) down the Seine, with his two friends Faulkner and Webb. We have not much record of this voyage, except that the three friends started from the Quai du Louvre with three carpet-bags and half a dozen bottles of wine for their luggage, and were sped by the jeers of the populace. But there is no doubt that the voyage was worthy of the pen of a Stevenson. One thing we know—that he discussed the building of a house with Webb on that journey, and that he had "lately taken a strong fancy for the human," as one of his friends wrote

about him. The explanation of all this was manifest when, after one more rapid flight to France "to buy old manuscripts and armour and ironwork and enamel," on the 26th of April 1859 he was married to Jane Burden at St. Michael's in Oxford. Dixon performed the ceremony, and Burne-Jones and some of his old Oxford friends were there. "It was the last scene in the Oxford life of the Brotherhood." But it was also the first scene in the life of Morris's wider brotherhood, which was destined to make an artistic onslaught upon the whole of England of the same kind which had been attempted upon the Oxford Union; and this onslaught was almost directly due to Morris's marriage. Finding that he now wanted a house, he placed the matter in the hands of his friend Webb. The two together began to work out the details of its architecture in accordance with their theories, and with a view to making it a centre of Morris's artistic work. Morris accordingly bought an orchard and meadow at Bexley Heath, close to the little village of Upton and some cottages called Hog's Hole; "the discovery of this name affording unspeakable and lasting satisfaction to Rossetti." They decided to build the house in the orchard, so that apples might tumble in at the windows on hot autumn nights, here, as later at Kelmscott Manor, a source of delight to Morris, whose love of Nature and passionate desire to draw close to her heart were far deeper and more elemental in him than any mere artistic feeling. Indeed—and this is no more than to say he was a great poet—his houses, art, poetry, and social science—a great deal of which is concerned with hay-making—all grew out of that love. It is

his own cry that comes from the girl in *News from Nowhere*:

> She led me up close to the house, and laid her shapely sun-browned hand and arm on the lichened wall as if to embrace it, and cried out, "O me! O me! How I love the earth and the seasons, and weather, and all things that deal with it, *and all that grows out of it,—as this has done*!"

The decoration of the interior of the Red House, as it was called, was to be a work of some years; and in the course of trying to make its rooms the most beautiful in England, Morris soon discovered that, except Persian carpets and blue china, there was very little to be bought ready-made of beauty enough to satisfy him. Nothing daunted, with the same fighting spirit which led him in later life to wind a challenging slug-horn outside the Dark Tower of our modern social system, he set about creating his own little oasis of beauty. Everything had to be made anew—wall-papers, tiles, oak dining-tables, chairs, candlesticks, table-glass, all underwent the touch of his transfiguring thought, the operations of which upon the flat ugliness of the period can be compared only with those of the spring and the resurrection of flowers and trees out of the desolation of winter. The reader will remember in connection with this the fact that many of Morris's designs in the flower-work of his earlier wall-papers, and in the backgrounds of designs for glass and tapestry, were actually suggested by the drawings in Gerard's *Herbal* which he had studied as a youthful naturalist.

The story of the origin of the firm of Morris and Company is a famous one. The first notion of it was largely due, it has been said, to Madox Brown and

Rossetti. It is interesting to note, in view of Morris's later social theories, that he welcomed the idea as one of "co-operation and common work among friends who were also artists." Burne-Jones had for some time been engaged in making designs for church windows. and Webb was a master of proportion and ornament, whether applied to the larger masses of architecture or to such things as tables and chairs and lamps. Meanwhile, the æsthetico-Catholic revival had begun in the churches, and there was an immediate demand for precisely the kind of work which the firm desired to provide. Their first commissions were for the decoration of St. Martin's, Scarborough, and St. Michael's, Brighton. The chancel roof of St. Michael's was painted by Morris, Webb, and Faulkner; and the windows executed from designs by Madox Brown and Burne-Jones.

There is a certain sense in which it may be said that all the work of these associates was "church work," inasmuch as their labour turned every building they touched into a dedicated temple of their art. It is one of the chief glories of their work that it was a continuous and natural growth, arising out of their delight in life itself, a real development of the "Renascence of Wonder" and its recognition of the beauty of common things. It was their endeavour to induce the growth of this natural beauty. The ugliness that they hated was an unnatural ugliness. Just as their ideal clothing for the human body was that which veiled the form while retaining its beauty, as opposed to the senseless parodies of it achieved by modern millinery, so their furniture and their wall-papers were indicative of a real return to

nature. We still hear their "æstheticism" spoken of (even by its would-be admirers) as if it were something rococo, or a highly cultivated pose—so hard is it even now for the "civilised" to realise that extreme beauty is not artificial but natural; even when they have seen the fantastic Early Victorian abortions vanishing like nightmares from their walls, and have watched the tender spring-dawn growth of Morris's designs, from the rose-trellis and daisy and pomegranate to the splendid masses and beautiful composition of the later patterns. Even more inspiring is it for us to trace the growth of the movement in its wider relations, beginning as it did with a capital even more insignificant relatively than that of the new world in *News from Nowhere*, Morris as usual being the financial backbone and staking a good deal on its success. As the work grew they came to employ about a dozen men and boys; and once more it is interesting to note, in view of Morris's later theories, that the boys were ferreted out from a Boys' Home in Euston Road and the men from Camden Town. A circular announcing the business and its aims displays the tone and temper of the enterprise. It has something of an august simplicity, and though it has been said to show traces of "the slashing hand and imperious accent of Rossetti," we think this is a mistake. If ever the hand of Morris was manifest it is here. It is like a page out of one of the finest parts of *News from Nowhere*. It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that in some ways it is the first manifesto of his glorified communism. The reader may judge for himself. The circular, headed "Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co., Fine Art Workmen in

Painting, Carving, Furniture, and the Metals," runs thus:

The growth of Decorative Art in this country, owing to the efforts of English Architects, has now reached a point at which it seems desirable that artists of reputation should devote their time to it. Although no doubt particular instances of success may be cited, still it must be generally felt that attempts of this kind hitherto have been crude and fragmentary. Up to this time, the want of that artistic supervision which can alone bring about harmony between the various parts of a successful work has been increased by the necessarily excessive outlay consequent on taking one individual artist from his pictorial labours.

The Artists whose names appear above hope by association to do away with this difficulty. Having among their number men of varied qualifications, they will be able to understand any species of decoration, mural or otherwise, from pictures properly so-called down to the consideration of the smallest work susceptible of Art beauty. It is anticipated that, by such co-operation, the largest amount of what is essentially the artist's work, along with his constant supervision, will be secured at the smallest possible expense, while the work done must necessarily be of a much more complete order than if any single artist were incidentally employed in the usual manner.

These Artists having for many years been deeply attached to the study of the Decorative Arts of all times and countries, have felt more than most people the want of some one place where they could either obtain or get produced work of a genuine and beautiful character. They have therefore now established themselves as a firm, for the production, by themselves and under their supervision, of—

I. Mural Decoration, either in Pictures or in Pattern Work, or merely in the arrangement of colours, as applied to dwelling-houses, churches, or public buildings.

II. Carving generally, as applied to Architecture.

III. Stained Glass, especially with reference to its harmony with Mural Decoration.

IV. Metal Work in all its branches, including jewellery.

V. Furniture, either depending for its beauty on its own design, on the application of materials hitherto overlooked, or on its conjunction with Figure or Pattern Painting. Under this head is included Embroidery of all kinds, Stamped Leather, and ornamental work in other such materials, besides every article necessary for domestic use.

It is only necessary to state further, that work of all the above classes will be estimated for and executed in a business-like manner; and it is believed that good decoration, involving rather the luxury of taste than the luxury of costliness, will be found to be much less expensive than is generally supposed.

This very remarkable document is one of extreme biographical interest. It is in itself, to all who can read between the lines, a clear indication that such diverse dreams or realities as the monastery that floated before Morris at Oxford, like an isle of bliss amid the beatings of our steely sea, the fighting firm of Morris and Company, and the still more strenuous brotherhood of Morris and the communists, were all part of the same continuous rebellion and aspiration of his mind, a burgeoning, an ever-increasing, ever-widening spring, breaking through the flat dark crust of modern conventions. And this, in turn, is the noblest and surest proof of the depth and reality of Morris's passion for beauty and the burning sincerity of his work, that it does lead him by inevitable stages to fight for that greatest brotherhood, that largest harmony of all.

It is almost symbolical of his intellectual process and its inevitable growth that he was forced to abandon Red House just as it was beginning to be the most beautiful place on earth, and that he abandoned it for his work

in Bloomsbury. His life at Red House had been one of almost perfect happiness. Only one door-panel is it recorded that he kicked out during his sojourn there. The garden had matured into rich beauty. The walls of the spacious stairs were being covered with paintings of scenes from the War of Troy, designed and executed by Burne-Jones. On a space in the hall there was to be a picture of a mediæval ship hung with shields and carrying Greek heroes. On other walls there were to be scenes from the Arthurian Tales and the *Niebelungenlied*. The rooms were glorious with embroidered hangings of green trees and birds wrought by his own hands, and having a running scroll emblazoned with his motto, "If I can." Great gatherings and ambrosial nights they had, too, in this palace of art, where Rossetti, Madox Brown, Mr. Swinburne, Webb, Faulkner, Burne-Jones, and his wife were frequent visitors. "Oh, the joy of those Saturdays to Mondays at Red House!" writes one of the guests of those days in the very accent of Morris himself; "the getting out at Abbey Wood Station and smelling the sweet air, and then the scrambling, swinging drive of three miles or so to the house; and the beautiful roomy place where we seemed to be coming home just as much as when we returned to our own rooms. . . . We laughed because we were happy." "It was the most beautiful sight in the world," says another, "to see Morris coming up from the cellar before dinner, beaming with joy, with his hands full of bottles of wine and others tucked under his arms."

However, his permanent income, derived from a copper-mine, began to diminish; his plan for sharing expenses with Burne-Jones fell through, owing to the

necessity for the latter to be near London. And with a growing family on his hands (his first daughter having been born in January 1861 and the second in March of the following year) and the growing demands of his own London business, Morris had seriously to think of giving up his palace of art. His decision was hastened by a severe attack of rheumatic fever in 1864. There is, perhaps, considerable significance in his reference to Tennyson's poem, *The Palace of Art*, in the following letter to Burne-Jones, dated "In bed, Red House," and written "in a very shaky hand," just as he was recovering from the fever. There is no doubt he was stirred to the depths about this time by the prospect of leaving his home, and the reference may indicate the beginnings of some such thoughts as he expressed later in *The Message of the March Wind*. There is an extraordinary childlike simplicity about the whole letter, from which we extract this one sentence :

> As to our palace of art, I confess your letter was a blow to me at first, though hardly an unexpected one : in short, I cried, but I have got over it now.

Accordingly, in the autumn of 1865 the Morrises found a new home in Queen Square, Bloomsbury, leaving magnificent treasures upon the walls of the Red House for the next fortunate possessor. He had written very little during his stay there, except a little of the cycle of poems about the Trojan War which was never completed.

CHAPTER IV

'THE LIFE AND DEATH OF JASON'

On his return to London, with the increased leisure acquired by the saving of his daily journey to business, Morris resumed his poetry. By 1867 he had completed *The Life and Death of Jason*, which was published in June of that year, and met with unexpected popularity, a second edition being called for almost immediately.

It was designed originally as one of the stories in his greater scheme of *The Earthly Paradise* (with which we shall deal in another chapter). It rapidly grew till its size forbade this, and he published it separately. But it retains the fascinating mediæval atmosphere of the larger scheme. In *Jason* we are taken into that enchanted and enchanting clime, "out of space, out of time," where Troy would be a red-gabled town of swinging bells like Bruges or Chartres. We are taken into this fairyland with scarcely more explanation than Shakespeare gives us with regard to that singularly English wood "near Athens" which is the scene of the world's greatest fairy-drama. "Scarcely more explanation," we say, for Morris does make his aims quite clear. His story is supposed from the outset to be the dream of a mediæval poet, a dream within a dream.

It would indeed be true to say that he wrote the poem more for the sake of drawing near to the soul of his beloved Middle Ages than for its Greek elements. It was the dream-element that he loved. But artistically his method is incomparably more "right" than Milton's Greek treatment of a Hebrew story in *Samson Agonistes*. There is no comparison possible from the point of view of method. Milton's — no matter what his other qualities might be — was the method of an imitative schoolboy. Morris's method was that of an artist so exquisite that he thrusts space and time under his feet, and creates his fabled cities out of that eternal light which never was on sea or land, without a single lapse into the light of common day. With so complete and easy a mastery does he carry the matter through that, even without explanation, he is completely justified. But he does to a certain extent set forth his aims in that exquisite opening of Book XVII., one of the passages that linger longest in the memory:

> Would that I
> Had but some portion of that mastery
> That from the rose-hung lanes of woody Kent
> Through these five hundred years such songs have sent
> To us, who, meshed within this smoky net
> Of unrejoicing labour, love them yet.
> *And thou, O Master!—Yea, my Master still,*
> *Whatever feet have scaled Parnassus' hill,*
> *Since like thy measures, clear and sweet and strong,*
> *Thames' stream scarce fettered drave the dace along*
> *Unto the bastioned bridge, his only chain.—*
> *O Master, pardon me, if yet in vain*
> *Thou art my Master, and I fail to bring*
> *Before men's eyes the image of the thing*
> *My heart is filled with: thou whose dreamy eyes*
> *Beheld the flush to Cressid's cheeks arise,*

When Troilus rode up the praising street,
As clearly as they saw thy townsmen meet
Those who in vineyards of Poictou withstood
The glittering horror of the steel-topped wood.

In many ways that passage is perhaps more completely representative of Morris's genius than almost any other in all his works, certainly more so than any other in *The Life and Death of Jason.* It contains perhaps the first indication in his poetry that his mind was turning to the social problems with which he was soon to busy himself, and it shows from what direction he was approaching them. It is his first cry against

the smoky net
Of unrejoicing labour.

Though no doubt he had long been dreaming

Of London, small, and white, and clean,
The clear Thames bordered by its gardens green.

The gap between *Jason* and *The Defence of Guenevere* is great. In the whole seventeen books of *Jason* there is not one obscure passage. Whatever defects the poem may have, it is limpid and pellucid as a brook. Here and there the water runs thin and shallow, but —as with the brook—it is not necessarily the less beautiful for that. Its bed is, for the most part, bright with exquisitely coloured pebbles, and occasionally with really precious stones. These qualities of limpidity and clearness are perhaps the only qualities that Morris —as a tale-teller—really had in common with Chaucer. Of Chaucer's power of characterisation, Chaucer's joviality and great earthy humour, he had not a trace. Chaucer's spontaneous anachronisms are of a very

different nature from those of Morris, who took a conscious artistic pleasure in the romantic shock or thrill that resulted from his bringing the facts of time and space into collision. Morris's æsthetic delight in the manipulation of his materials, his delight in the Middle Ages as a kind of Wonderland, his delight in beautiful fabrics, the thin green gowns that are worn by his Greek girls, the jewels, the precious metals, the colours—gold and cinnabar and blue,—his delight in them for their own sacramental sake even more than for the tapestry-like effects he was able to achieve with them, all this belongs to a craft unknown to Chaucer and only possible to an heir of many ages of poetry and art. Chaucer himself is used by Morris as a valuable colour on his palette, a sure means of evoking certain suggestions and memories. He sees the Middle Ages through an emotional haze which is essentially modern; for it is merely a phase of his perpetual "passion of the past." Probably his point of view was not quite possible for any poet before the nineteenth century. Keats alone, once or twice, approached it in such poems as *The Eve of St. Mark.* But the materials were not then so lavishly to hand; and it was not a question of "inspiration." It is indeed probable that Morris—who stoutly denied that "inspiration" had anything to do with artistic craft—was in some ways hampered by the wealth of ornament that lay ready to his hand, in books, in pictures, in tapestries, and in stained windows. Out of all these things, too often perhaps disregarding the fount within himself from which he might have drawn directly, he made a kind of poetic dictionary that at first sight would seem to have very little bearing

upon the realities of life, and in one sense seriously limited his great poetic energies. His work, in a word, was as highly conventionalised as that of Pope, though the conventions were new, the product of a romantic period, and for the most part brought together by his own hand. These conventions he used as a kind of literary shorthand, and he limited himself to them in a very extraordinary way. There is only a certain and narrow range of natural objects which he will allow himself to mention—whether they be of the earth or the sea, flower or fish, or bird or beast. He will speak of roses, for instance, of lilies, of sunflowers, of violets, and of daisies. But "Ragged Robin" or "Old Man's Beard" or "Shepherd's Purse" would be as impossible to him as it would be possible to Shakespeare or to Tennyson. The lark and nightingale and a few other birds he will allow; but the bullfinch and the yellow-hammer, the white-throat and the herring-gull are all, we may say beforehand, avoided by him as if they were turkeys. There are many more which might or might not appear in almost any other English poet from Shakespeare to Tennyson, but would at once be dismissed by a practised reader as impossible to Morris, who in nine cases out of ten would be content with some such phrase as "the brown bird's tune." It is the same with his seascapes. In place of the marvellous succession of exquisitely true and beautiful pictures of the sea which glimmer and recede and foam and roar through the poems of Tennyson, from that marvellous description of a North Sea wave in the *Idylls of the King* to that

> scream of a madden'd beach dragg'd down by the wave

in *Maud*,—in place of these we have in Morris a series of conventional drawings of a singularly limited range. For the most part his waves are "green," a little less frequently they are "blue"; and beyond that he has—in energetic moments—"white" and "tumbling" and perhaps two or three words more, all of which he uses over and over again. In less energetic moods he is usually content with the quaint inversion "the water wan," which occurs some hundreds of times in the course of his works, and certainly scores of times in *Jason* alone.

Morris's attitude with regard to pictures and tapestries throws an interesting light on his literary methods. He would have liked the faces in Burne-Jones's pictures "less highly finished, less charged with the meaning of the painting." He thought the feet and hands were as important as the faces; and "he was quite satisfied with the simple and almost abstract types of expression that can be produced in tapestry." He thought that the interest of a picture ought to be diffused throughout it as equally as possible. And, at the very moment when to the public he seemed to be leaving Nature behind him altogether, he was really returning to her. When he heard the "brown bird" singing he was nearer to what the first man might have heard in Eden before God's creatures had been cloaked with names and arranged in catalogues. Just when he seemed to be becoming artificial, he was attaining a new simplicity and preparing a Renascence of Wonder which should startle men out of their outworn academic lethargy. He startled them with simple gold abstracted from setting suns. The image of his Muse at this time is that great God's

angel of *The Defence of Guenevere.* Men opened their eyes and saw this angel standing at the foot of their familiar bed, with dyes too simple to be known on earth, on his great wings, and hands held out two ways,

> light from the inner skies
>
> Showing him well, and making his commands
> Seem to be God's commands.

And in his hands were the cloths of night and light; and one of these strange choosing-cloths was blue, the other red; one of them heaven, the other hell. It was a different simplicity from that of Wordsworth; but it was a real advance in the revelation of the beauty of the world to pass from the wonder of flowers and stars (which had been awakened so often that men were growing used to it) to the strangeness and more elemental wonder of whiteness and burnished gold. "We are such stuff as dreams are made on"; and hundreds woke again to the fact when Morris began to use that stuff in his tapestries and poems. Here indeed was the very stuff of dreams and of the world, dream within dream. If he loved poetry because it was like tapestry, he loved tapestry because—like his wall-papers and his Red House—it was a natural growth, natural in its every thread and fibre. When he drank wine, he was drinking the blood of the sun; and when he touched silk embroidery, he felt not only the still picture of a flowering orchard, but the processes of the world:

> Lo, silken my garden
> And silken my sky,
> And silken my apple-boughs
> Hanging on high;

All wrought by the Worm
In the peasant carle's cot
On the Mulberry leafage
When summer was hot!

We have spoken of the limitations that his method imposed upon his poetic energies; but to counterbalance these, it is obvious that there were many and great compensations, even from a practical point of view. Given his genius, he had now invented a loom for weaving poetry; and when once he had decided upon his subject very little remained to be done except to translate it into a language mechanically limited in such a way that it was impossible for him to fall very far short of his ideal. This is, of course, the origin of the legends about his extraordinary rapidity of work, and the reason why so vast a body of stories as *The Earthly Paradise* maintains an excellence so astonishingly level and uniform. It was easy for Morris to say that a poet was "no good" unless he could compose an epic while he was weaving tapestry; for to him both arts were alike, in method and in result. And while there was rough material in the world, there was no reason why his verses should come to an end any sooner than his hands stopped working. There was no wrestling of the thought with the words, no striving after the one and only phrase. Everything he touched must be rendered by the colours and the threads he had prepared beforehand. For the purposes of his tales, too, a certain breadth was obtainable by this method. After the minute and exquisite art of Tennyson, it was not unrefreshing to be told simply that the sea was "green"—to be given certain nature-symbols and to be left to imagine the rest.

One of the great principles of style, economy of the reader's attention, is certainly maintained by Morris's method; and there are few books, in prose or verse, of fiction or anything else, so easy to read with enjoyment and rapidity as *The Life and Death of Jason.* Page after page and book after book slip by as the reader follows the heroes on their quest for the Golden Fleece, and through all the wild adventures of their return, as easily as if one were pacing down a long gallery hung with tapestries telling the whole story without the intervention of language. Never is one's easy progress arrested by the superlative excellence of any great single line. There are no jewels five words long in Morris. His lines are never "of their own arduous fulness reverent." Mr. Swinburne, as we remarked, has criticised his craftsmanship on this point, and said that elision—of which Morris takes no notice at all—is a law, and not a privilege, of English verse. But the poetry of Morris, as a matter of fact, has no place in the evolution of English metres. In a certain sense his tales, at any rate, are not in verse at all. Hundreds of lines like—

Then went the man and came again to him;

or

As for his years, and now upon his feet;

or

And longed for this and that, and on his tongue;

or

If there were not some little help in me—

hundreds of lines like these, in which there is often only one word of any metrical weight, follow upon one

another. There is no light and shade of sound within the lines, no beat, no sense of metrical movement.

In these verses, for instance, from *Jason*:

> *Therewith from out her* wallet *did she* draw
> The phial, and a crystal without flaw . . .
> Then said: "But now I bid thee have no doubt"—

the first line, ostensibly an iambic pentameter, opens with a run of as many as five weak and unaccented syllables, leading up to an accent in "wallet," so light that the line would slip away altogether if it were not for the heavy terminal rhymes which weigh it down and keep it in place as with the weighty gold fringes of the tapestry. The first syllable of "wallet," the expletive "did," and the terminal rhyme "draw" are practically the only metrical values the line possesses; nor does he atone for this by the fulness of the next line, which may be compared with Tennyson's pentameter:

> Laborious orient ivory, sphere in sphere;

or

> Ruining along the illimitable inane.

Of the principles of elision and syllabic equivalence, and the advantages not only of sound and movement, but of compression, conciseness, and brevity to be derived therefrom, Morris was quite careless. Very often his lines appear to be a mere succession of monosyllabic prepositions and pronouns. The satirical verses of Pope—

> Though oft the ear the open vowels tire,
> While expletives their feeble aid do join,
> And ten low words oft creep in one dull line—

would often seem to apply with absolute truth to the mere craftsmanship of Morris. The frequency of his use of the line of "ten low words" is astonishing,

though they are seldom heavy enough to creep, and they certainly do not tire. The truth is that neither the eighteenth century satire of Pope nor the modern criticism of Mr. Swinburne really apply to Morris at all; for Morris was not really writing his tales in English verse. First and last, he was weaving them in tapestry. His lines are thin threads, he cares not how thin. Tennyson might compress twenty or more syllables into an iambic pentameter: Morris very rarely exceeds the ten, and very thin ones at that. He often seems in this regard to be deliberately aiming at an idea directly opposite to that of all other poets, and to be deliberately drawing out his lines to their utmost tenuity. To come upon an extra syllable in a line of *The Earthly Paradise* would be, one feels when once absorbed in the work, to come upon a flaw; and an extra syllable certainly does startle the Morris reader about as much as a pair of viciously open vowels would the reader of Tennyson, Milton, Keats, or Wordsworth. This tendency to make the line hold as little syllabic weight as possible occasionally results in a real defect.

Nor fear the fire-breathing bulls one whit

is a weightier line than most in *Jason*; and it is a pity that Morris should have atoned for this by making two syllables of "fire."

The Pre-Raphaelite poets nearly all abused the light ending of the line which Tennyson taught them and used to such perfect purpose in *Œnone*:

from the violets her light foot
Shone rosy-white, and o'er her rounded form
Between the shadows of the vine-bunches
Floated the glowing sunlights, as she moved.

In those lines the lightly-touched ending of "vine-bunches" has the effect of an exquisite natural curve, a curling over of the metrical wave, as it were, to break in the last line of the paragraph. The "Pre-Raphaelites" degraded this rare and beautiful feature of Tennyson's poetry into a perpetually recurrent trick, and the smaller the artist was the more often he used it. Morris himself — perhaps because his constant tendency to "thin" his lines urged him to it—is not without faults in this respect. He opens a verse paragraph thus clumsily:

> Then came Asclepius, whom the far-darter
> Saved living from the lifeless corpse of her
> He once loved well.

And, of course, there are thousands of couplets with the less objectionable forms of light ending, such as—

> Acastus, Pelias' son, from wandering
> Was come that self-same day unto the king.

Once, in the introduction to *The Death of Paris* in *The Earthly Paradise*, he comes as near to direct imitation of Tennyson as this:

> But little hid the bright-bloomed vine-bunches.

But, on the whole, the metrical tricks which he consciously employs contribute to the effect he desires to produce. And it must be noted that the "thin" lines he employs are not unjustifiable on this ground. They certainly do tend to diffuseness; but it is doubtful whether Morris could have obtained his tapestry-like effects without that generosity of space in which he unfolded them. Moreover, the thinness of the lines practically forces the reader to read them syllable by

syllable, with the right air of slow and dreamy simplicity which is necessary to such elementary observations as those about the child Jason, who

> now upon his feet
> Went firmly, and began to feel life sweet,
> And longed for this and that, and on his tongue,
> Bewildered, half articulate, speech hung.

This extraordinary simplicity was not confined to Morris's pictures of childhood. He seems to have determined, along with his other conventions, to introduce nothing but the most elementary and elemental psychology. Of the treacherous speeches of King Pelias, for instance, he writes in ten monosyllables—

> Such good words said he, but the thoughts were bad.

Childlike simplicity, whether it be conscious or unconscious, could hardly go farther; and it may be doubted whether any method but that of Morris could have achieved that kind of effect. The speech is one with the thought, and the style is justified at once. It is obvious that the individual lines can have very little value when taken separately, and that they must be woven into a tapestry spacious enough to hold something like a world on the same scale if they are not to be merely banal.

The object of the process is something like that of a painter who, in order to suggest a light unattainable on the scale of nature, lowers the tones of his whole picture and attains it proportionately. Such work is in a certain sense symbolical. We get such words as "good" and "bad" where another poet might give us a series of complex emotions; and a very little lower down the

scale, in place of certain mental sensations we get either physical sensations or gold and cinnabar and blue.

In all this, of course, the parallel is complete with the methods of work in tapestry or stained glass. For there the expedients to which Morris resorted in verse are necessary. This weaving-process with his thin verse-threads Morris carried out with supreme success. He threw away all ambition to achieve the kind of direct effects at which Tennyson and Wordsworth, and perhaps all the greater English poets aimed, and in return he gained an indefinable power of suggestion. In spite of the vast bulk of his work, it gives the impression of great strength in reserve, and it has something of the force which we usually associate with reticence. Never once do we feel that he is exerting himself or, to put it crudely, on his top-note. Nowhere, amongst all the poems directly describing the hunt of Diana, is there anything that even approaches Morris's verbal picture, in which it is somehow conveyed to the reader without description at all, by a dream within the dream, a reticence within the reticence of the forest-cave where Jason lies asleep :—

> But in the night-time once did Jason wake,
> And seem to see the moonlit branches shake
> With huge, unwonted clamour of the chase;
> Then up he sprung, but ere he went one pace
> Unto the cave's mouth, Chiron raised his arm
> And drew him back, and said : "Surely, no charm
> Thou hast, my son, against Diana's sight,
> Who over Pelion goes abroad this night;
> Now let those go to her that she doth call,
> Because no fenced town, brazen gate or wall,
> No coat of mail, or seven-folded shield,
> Can guard thee from the wound that ne'er is healed,
> When she is angry. Sleep again, my son,
> Nor wish to spoil great deeds not yet begun."

Then Jason lay and trembled, while the sound
Grew louder through the moonlit woods around,
And died off slowly, going toward the sea,
Leaving the fern-owl wailing mournfully.

The method is different, but there are Shakespearian qualities in that passage. Curious as the phrase may seem, it has the thrill of a sudden and glorious roll of drums heralding some immortal dramatic moment. It is probably due to the method which Morris employed, moreover, that the reader's belief is never strained in any of the miraculous occurrences in his work. Never, perhaps, has there been so successful an attempt to recapture the childlike faith of the pagan world in their immortals as *The Life and Death of Jason*. The gods in Morris have something of their old opaque symbolical significance, which we lose altogether on the spiritual plane of Wordsworth or Tennyson. By reducing his whole world to the childlike and primitive scale of values of which we have spoken, he was able, alone among the moderns, really to

Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.

Enchanting as a fairy tale, *The Life and Death of Jason* is yet as credible as any modern novel when once the reader is absorbed in it. And it is perhaps the most complete revitalisation of a mythological world ever accomplished in English. It would almost be possible, one feels, to reconstruct the whole of the Greek mythology from Morris's tale of Jason alone. Yet the tale is told very straightforwardly, with very few divergences. It is all done by a semi-symbolical suggestiveness. His very reticences, like the walls of

Æetes' palace, subtly reveal the miraculous world beyond. Perhaps, as an example of Morris's tapestry method, his description of this palace is one of the finest passages in all his work. Its colouring is exquisite. One has only to compare it with any similar passage in *Endymion* to discover its incomparable lucidity and its freedom from the botched strokes and smudgy erasures of the earlier work :—

And straight the king took Jason by the hand,
And entered, and the Minyæ now did stand
In such a hall as there has never been
Before or afterwards, since Ops was queen.
The pillars, made the mighty roof to hold,
The one was silver and the next was gold
All down the hall ; the roof, of some strange wood
Brought over sea, was dyed as red as blood,
Set thick with silver flowers, and delight
Of intertwining figures wrought aright.
With richest webs the marble walls were hung,
Picturing sweet stories by the poets sung
From ancient days, so that no wall seemed there,
But rather forests black and meadows fair,
And streets of well-built towns, with tumbling seas
About their marble wharves and palaces ;
And fearful crags and mountains ; and all trod
By changing feet of giant, nymph, and God,
Spear-shaking warrior and slim-ankled maid.
The floor, moreover, of the place was laid
With coloured stones, wrought like fair flowery grass ;
And, ready for what needs might come to pass,
Midmost the hall, two clear streams trickled down,
O'er wondrous gem-like pebbles, green and brown,
Betwixt smooth banks of marble, and therein
Bright-coloured fish shone through the water thin.
Now, 'midst these wonders were there tables spread,
Whither the wondering seafarers were led,
And there with meat and drink full delicate
Were feasted, and strange dainty things they ate,

Of unused savour, and drank godlike wine ;
While from the golden galleries, most divine
Heart-softening music breathed about the place ;
And 'twixt the pillars, at a gentle pace,
Passed lovely damsels, raising voices sweet
And shrill unto the music, while their feet
From thin dusk raiment now and then would gleam
Upon the polished edges of the stream.

It is very largely by a skilful use of this kind of description of artistic representations of the gods and mythological personages, dream within dream as ever, that he is able to convey the sense of their reality to the reader without shocking him, and at last to introduce miraculous personages and events without unduly straining one's modern credulity. Whether he did this consciously or not, it is a fact that a world of myth and miracle surges around Morris's tales with an actuality that could hardly have been achieved, and certainly has not been achieved, by any other method. *The Life and Death of Jason* and *The Earthly Paradise* are the greatest examples in English of what "atmosphere" can do.

And through this world-wide atmosphere, these enchanted and exquisitely coloured mists of legend, the *Argo* plunges quite directly to the goal of her adventures. There are one or two brief divergences from the main plot, like the story of the loss of Hylas, with the exquisite song of the water-nymph :

"I know a little garden-close
Set thick with lily and red rose . . .
There comes a murmur from the shore,
And in the place two fair streams are,
Drawn from the purple hills afar,
Drawn down unto the restless sea ;
The hills whose flowers ne'er fed the bee,

> The shore no ship has ever seen,
> Still beaten by the billows green,
> Whose murmur comes unceasingly
> Unto the place for which I cry."

But this divagation is hardly longer than the story as told by Theocritus; if anything, it is more beautiful; and to a modern, at any rate, the method of Morris has given it a curious reality which is lacking to the beautiful ancient idyll. This reality comes, as always, from his subtle reticences and indirectness, and his suggestive use of ornaments in which the reader can more readily be induced to believe than in the wearers they imply if these latter had been dealt with more directly. We might not be ready to believe in a "nymph" directly; but we can believe, for instance, that the sun gleamed in the strange gems about her waist and in the jewelled sandals on her feet, or that white shoulders would "gleam" as the other nymphs approached the bank:

> Above the dark grey water as they went,
> And still before them a great ripple sent.

It is always to these "gleams" and "ripples" that our attention is chiefly drawn, and it breaks the direct shock with a realism that compels at least a willing suspension of disbelief.

> Toward the bank they drew,
> And landing, *felt the grass and flowers blue*
> *Against their unused feet.*

Nobody who has bathed from a river-bank—say, the Thames above Oxford—can fail to recognise the reality of passages like that; and though on reflection one may be inclined to doubt whether the feet of nymphs would be so unused to the feel of grass and

flowers, one must also recognise a vitality in the work which is lacking, for instance, in a poem far more beautiful on other and, it must be admitted, higher grounds — Tennyson's *Œnone*. Tennyson's poem is not only concerned with a conflict of the soul. It is written on that higher scale of which we spoke above. It is interesting to compare with our quotation from *Jason* the passage in which Tennyson describes the approach of the three goddesses to Paris :—

> " Then to the bower they came,
> Naked they came to that smooth-swarded bower,
> And at their feet *the crocus brake like fire,*
> *Violet, amaracus, and asphodel,*
> *Lotos and lilies*: and a wind arose,
> And overhead the wandering ivy and vine,
> This way and that, in many a wild festoon
> Ran riot, garlanding the gnarled boughs
> With bunch and berry and flower thro' and thro'.
>
> " O mother Ida, harken ere I die.
> On the tree-tops a crested peacock lit,
> And o'er him flow'd a golden cloud, and lean'd
> Upon him, slowly dropping fragrant dew.
> Then first I heard the voice of her, to whom
> Coming thro' Heaven, like a light that grows
> Larger and clearer, with one mind the Gods
> Rise up for reverence."

There is nothing here of that simple and primitive realism, the rendering of elementary physical sensations, with which Morris is content at the corresponding height of his own scale. Tennyson aims at a direct conquest of the reader with the awe of the present goddesses. Every cadence, the majestic repetition of the opening words, the dramatically accentuated "then," and every masterly and Titian-like colour, have that direct con-

quest in view. The comparison of the two methods is valuable in view of the greater reality and vitality which some critics, and notably Mr. Swinburne, aver Morris's Arthurian poems possess as opposed to the finer workmanship of Tennyson's. It is not entirely a question of this simple opposition. The two men are working on entirely different planes.

Tennyson's *Holy Grail* is written on an entirely higher and larger scale of values than that of any poem by any of the "Pre-Raphaelites." The Pre-Raphaelites certainly were—and we use the phrase in a purely relative and no derogatory sense—the "fleshly school." Their complaint against Tennyson's Arthur was precisely that which Tennyson's more comprehensive intellect saw for himself and put into the mouth of Guenevere, namely, that Arthur was not Lancelot—that he was not the low sun which "gives the colour." The Pre-Raphaelites frankly preferred the colour and gave it—Morris perhaps most exquisitely of all, owing to his more suggestive and reticent method. How typical, what an allegory of this method, the concluding paragraph of the Hylas episode is, the reader may judge. It will be noted, however, that where the word "naked" is used in the following passage a physical sensation is suggested—as opposed to the burning glory and gleam of the Tennysonian painting—and that the gurgling river hides and reveals the nymphs in more senses than one. Their gentle hands

> began to touch
> His hair, his hands, his closed eyes; and at last
> Their eager naked arms about him cast,
> And bore him, sleeping still, as by some spell,
> Unto the depths where they were wont to dwell;

Then softly down the reedy bank they slid,
And with small noise the gurgling river hid
The flushed nymphs and the heedless sleeping man.
But ere the water covered them, one ran
Across the mead and caught up from the ground
The brass-bound spear, and buckler bossed and round,
The ivory-hilted sword, and coat of mail,
Then took the stream; so what might tell the tale,
Unless the wind should tell it, or the bird
Who from the reed these things had seen and heard?

It is in more ways than one that the above may be opposed to the description in Tennyson of how an arm, "clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful," arose from out the bosom of the lake, holding the sword. The last two lines, in which the wind and the bird are indicated as witnesses, is an admirable instance of Morris's method of indirect and subtle affirmation. It is very different (though there is a superficial resemblance) from Sir Bedivere's two evasive lines to King Arthur in Tennyson's poem, where a mental conflict is again concerned, and a quite different and higher scale of values employed:

"I heard the water lapping on the crag,
And the long ripple washing in the reeds."

Throughout the whole tale of Jason, as indeed throughout the whole of Morris's work, the writing is deliberately on that lower scale of values. The scene where Jason and Medea fall in love is accordingly possessed with the very spirit of the childlike yet passionate old pagan story. Medea visits Jason in his room before dawn to warn him of his danger at her father's hands, and at the same time to confess her love (though she has only known him a few hours). Without any preliminaries, she asks him to kiss her and

listen to her plans for his safety. He replies with allusions to the "unseen delight of her fair body" and her limbs "so longed for," declaring that he would rather burn in undying flames than turn to his "hollow ship" and leave her behind. She is not less quick to respond:

> "O Prince, I came
> To save your life. I cast off fear and shame
> A little while, but fear and shame are here.
> The hand thou holdest trembles with my fear,
> With shame my cheeks are burning, and the sound
> Of mine own voice: but ere this hour comes round,
> We twain will be betwixt the dashing oars,
> The ship still making for the Grecian shores."

The description of the flight of the two lovers through the silent freshness of the night is one of great beauty; and the passage where Medea stays her lover on their way to the sleeping quay, under the momentary shadow of her unhappy end, is very tenderly and pathetically suggestive — without implying any of the foresight which would "spoil the story."

> "O love, turn round, and note the goodlihead,
> My father's palace shows beneath the stars.
> Bethink thee of the men grown old in wars,
> Who do my bidding; what delights I have,
> How many ladies lie in wait to save
> My life from toil and carefulness, and think
> How sweet a cup I have been used to drink,
> And how I cast it to the ground for thee.
> Upon the day thou weariest of me,
> I wish that thou mayst somewhat think of this,
> And twixt thy new-found kisses, and the bliss
> Of something sweeter than thine old delight,
> Remember thee a little of this night
> Of marvels, and this starlit, silent place,
> And these two lovers standing face to face."

"Upon the day thou weariest of me"! The line has

all the pathos of the poetry of Morris, the simple and sometimes almost intolerable poignancy of regret for the sweet days that must die. Almost intolerable, we say, for, written as it is on that low scale of values, it has an almost physical appeal. There are wrenched hands and writhen lips in it, and yet a sweetness, a patience, a resignation to fate, a wistfulness as of the tears in the eyes of dumb creatures. *Sunt lacrimae rerum.* And how much nearer to the real speech of lovers these simple words are, after all, than the loftier or more subtle speeches to which the work of more complex poets has accustomed us.

> Upon the day thou weariest of me,
> I wish that thou mayst somewhat think of this.

How many thousands and hundreds of thousands of lovers on this earth, since the days of Jason, must have whispered, one thinks, almost those very words under the silent stars!

The two lines are an excellent example, too, of Morris's peculiar craftsmanship. Their tenuity or lack of syllabic weight leads, or should lead, the reader to render them syllable by syllable, with something of the slowness of a child spelling them out. In other words, spirit and form are perfectly at one. Never perhaps has that kind of elemental or primitive sympathy been recaptured so perfectly as in these tales of Morris; though, in another key altogether, Mr. Swinburne has given us the other side of the same exquisite pagan naïveté when he makes Sappho exclaim:

> "And they shall know me as ye who have known me here,
> *Last year when I loved Atthis, and this year*
> *When I love thee.*"

But from every other point of view *Anactoria* and *Jason* are poles asunder.

From the purely pictorial point of view—pictorial in the best sense—the passage describing the midnight arrival of the two lovers at the silent quay where *Argo* is moored is one of the finest in all Morris's poetry. Coming where it does, with regard to its context, it is a masterpiece, instinct with the very spirit of romance. In some mysterious way it impresses the reader with something of that curious feeling of vast impending change, of farewell to familiar things and of the voyage into the unknown, which Medea and perhaps Jason must have felt. And this feeling is partly conveyed by the mere mention of the night-wind ; but more, one may think, by the sudden introduction of that strange chord of colour—the twittering of a caged green bird within an Indian ship, amid that listening midnight stillness. The reader will judge for himself :—

> And so, unchallenged, did they draw anear
> The long white quays, and at the street's end now
> Beheld the ships' masts standing row by row
> Stark black against the stars : then cautiously
> Peered Jason forth, ere they took heart to try
> The open starlit place ; but nought he saw
> Except the night-wind twitching the loose straw
> From half-unloaded keels, and nought he heard
> But the strange twittering of a caged green bird
> Within an Indian ship, and from the hill
> A distant baying : dead night lay so still,
> Somewhat they doubted ; natheless forth they passed,
> And Argo's painted sides they reached at last.

The description of the flight of the *Argo* and the fight with the ship that blocked its way is almost equally

vivid, and ablaze with rolling clouds of exquisite colour, fit to be compared with Turner's picture of "Ulysses deriding Polyphemus." The tragedy of the love of Jason and Medea is subtly developed through almost imperceptible but inevitable gradations. The interest of the story is marvellously sustained through all the wild adventures on the northern river and the return home. It may safely be said, indeed, that hardly any single poem of equal length can hold the reader's attention as does this one—a fact due partly to Morris's method and its independence of the beauty of individual lines, and also to the genius with which he somehow contrives to make the voyage of the *Argo* flash side-lights on the journey of life itself. We are always subtly conscious that he is writing on the lower scale of values of which we have spoken, and that in the opaque symbolism of his tapestries the Golden Fleece represents all the thousand complex desires and ambitions—wealth, power, fame—for which we ourselves may be striving; and, at the same time, it represents their inadequacy to satisfy. The red wine that the heroes drink in the torch-light is quaffed with the joy that is almost pain, the joy of life that is so sweet and so brief; and the torches seem always to be illuminating a little space enisled amidst the eternal darkness. The whole poem is thus transfused with emotional colour. It streams through the exquisite description of the Paradise of Circe, where, as Medea passed, she saw

> Some bronzed seafarer kissing eagerly
> White feet or half-bared bosom.

It is the harmonising element of all these varied and

glittering pictures, softening and subduing and tinting them all as with a universal sunset glow. The Sirens sing and Orpheus outsings them:

> But far away the sea-beat Minyae
> Cast forth the foam, as through the growing night
> They laboured ever, having small delight
> In life all empty of that promised bliss,
> *In love that scarce can give a dying kiss,*
> In pleasure ending sweet songs with a wail,
> In fame that little can dead men avail. . . .
> Yet as night died, and the cold sea and grey
> Seemed running with them toward the dawn of day,
> Needs must they once again forget their death,
> Needs must they, being alive and drawing breath,
> As men who of no other life can know
> In their own minds again immortal grow.

And they come to the Garden of the Hesperides; "a place not made for earthly bliss, or eyes of dying men" —for, superficially, no other reason than that

> growing there
> The yellow apple and the painted pear,
> And well-filled golden cups of oranges
> Hung.

And from the *Argo* "many a sea-beat face" gazed longingly on that Paradise; but Medea said:

> "Get back unto the oars, O Minyae,
> Nor loiter here, for what have such as we
> To do herein, where, 'mid undying trees,
> Undying watch the wise Hesperides,
> . . . therefore haste,
> Nor yet in wondering your fair lives waste;
> For these are as the Gods, nor think of us,
> Nor to their eyes can aught be glorious
> That son of man can do; would God that I
> Could see far off the misty headland lie, . . .

For I grow weary of the dashing spray,
And ceaseless roll of interwoven seas,
And fain were sitting 'neath the whispering trees
In homely places, where the children play,
Who change like me, grow old, and die some day."

There are traces in all this, perhaps, of Morris's original intention to make *Jason* a part of *The Earthly Paradise*. The leading theme throughout, in both cases, is the simple desire of man to escape death, and, simultaneously, his heart-rending recognition of the fact that perhaps it is death that makes his little life seem so sweet. The simplicity of the theme is in itself an example of Morris's methods, for it confronts us with the eternal problem of the meaning of the universe quite as effectively as the more complex methods of a Shakespeare, though with less variety and completeness of illustration. And, indeed, with such lines as

In love that scarce can give a dying kiss

Morris approaches the pathos of Shakespeare more nearly than any modern poet. Such lines may almost be compared with the immortal farewell of Antony:

"Of many thousand kisses the poor last."

The Song of the Hesperides is an exquisite example, too, of Morris's low-scaled reticence: the three sisters warn the departing Minyae that—

"Your hearts shall pay in sorrowing
For want of many a half-seen thing.

"Lo, such as is this garden green
In days past, all the world has been,
And what we know all people knew,
Save this, that unto worse all grew.

"But since the golden age is gone,
This little place is left alone,
Unchanged, unchanging. . . .

"Neither from us shall wisdom go
To fill the hungering hearts of men,
Lest to them threescore years and ten
Come but to seem a little day,
Once given, and taken soon away.
Nay, rather let them find their life
Bitter and sweet, fulfilled of strife,
Restless with hope, vain with regret,
Trembling with fear, most strangely set
'Twixt memory and forgetfulness; . . .
And surely when all this is past,
They shall not want their rest at last.

"Let earth and heaven go on their way,
While still we watch from day to day,
In this green place left all alone,
A remnant of the days long gone."

The climax and crown of the whole story is attained, of course, in the scenes where Medea's doom is fulfilled and Jason wearies of her. The letter which she sends to Jason, with the deadly gift to his new love, contains some of the most beautiful passages in modern poetry. It renders the queen's bitterness, wrath, anguish, and immortal yearning to her lover with incomparable power and pathos. There is a masterly touch where she stands crushed by the news that Jason is about to forsake her:

A sound to her was brought
Of children's voices!

With a groan she draws away her fingers from her tortured face, takes up her tablets, and writes "such piteous words as these":

"Thou knowest yet the whispered words I said
Upon that night—thou never canst forget
That happy night of all nights. Ah! and yet

Why make I these long words, that thou the more
Mayst hate me, who already hat'st me sore,
Since 'midst thy pleasure I am grown a pain.
Be happy! for thou shalt not hear again
My voice, and with one word this scroll is done—
Jason, I love thee, yea, love thee alone."

Then, thinking of the woman upon whom she has already planned a terrible vengeance, and of her children, who will also have to die to complete her vengeance, she is caught up to the tragic heights of all but the highest of the creations of Elizabethan drama:

"Kindly I deal with thee, mine enemy;
Since swift forgetfulness to thee I send.
But thou shalt die—his eyes shall see thine end—
Ah! if thy death alone could end it all!
But ye—shall I behold you when leaves fall,
In some sad evening of the autumn-tide?
Or shall I have you sitting by my side
Amidst the feast, so that folk stare and say,
'Sure the grey wolf has seen the queen to-day'? . . .
Must I bethink me of the upturned sods,
And hear a voice say: 'Mother, wilt thou come
And see us resting in our new-made home,
Since thou wert used to make us lie full soft,
Smoothing our pillows many a time and oft? . . .
Thy hands would bathe us when we were thine own,
Now doth the rain wash every shining bone.'"

The whole passage abounds in those extraordinarily simple and poignant lines of which Morris alone among modern poets seems to possess the secret. His lower scale of values gives him more scope for rising, without ever running the risk of losing himself in the "intense inane." The result is not that he does actually rise higher, comparatively, than other poets, but that he is able to be more poignantly natural, more realistic (paradoxical as the word may seem of a writer so

essentially romantic) than any poet of his time, the truth being that the highest realism and the highest romanticism are one. Medea's passionately reiterated, "Be happy! think that I have never been!" and such extraordinarily naïve yet faithful phrases as "upon the day when I for evermore must go away," or that final master-stroke of simplicity, "Jason, I love thee, yea, love thee alone!" surely these are nearer to the heart of the real woman speaking—nearer not to her actual words perhaps, for they would hardly be so articulate, but nearer to what she would have said if she could—than anything uttered by any of Shelley's, or, if the matter be well considered, even of the greater number of Browning's women. This is not to say that Morris is, for that reason, a greater poet than Browning. He is, in fact, a poet who has learnt a great deal from Browning; and, indeed, the debt of all the "Pre-Raphaelite" poets to Browning is far greater than is yet recognised. Perhaps the line in *Any Wife to any Husband*—

> Why need the other women know so much?

is Browning's nearest approach to the heart of a woman, and it is almost a typical Morris line, though it is not suffused, as all Morris's lines are, with the wistful sunset-coloured atmosphere of his larger theme, the passing sweetness of life, the change and decay of all mortal joy and beauty, and the quick-coming of death. Here again it is the low sun that gives the colour, and Browning works on a higher scale of values: his "any wife" concerns herself very largely with the idea of immortality. It is perhaps loftier poetry, but it is not so poignant and

not really so vital; for the moments when a woman is consciously concerned with such subjects are not the moments when she is really living with all her heart and soul and flesh and blood. The cry of Medea, "Be happy!" compresses into two words quite as much passion, anguish, and love as are contained in whole pages of Browning.

CHAPTER V

'THE EARTHLY PARADISE'

STIMULATED by the success of *Jason*, Morris made great progress with his large scheme of *The Earthly Paradise*. On the 20th of June 1867 he wrote to a friend: "I fancy I shall do pretty well now; last week I had made up my mind that I shouldn't be able to publish *The Earthly Paradise*, and was very low. I am as anxious as you are to get on with that work, and am going to set to work hard now. I hope you won't let any rubbish pass without collaring it. I am too old for that kind of game." From this time on, both at London and Oxford, where the Morrises spent some of the Long Vacation with Mr. and Mrs. Burne-Jones, he wrote story after story for the great scheme with extraordinary rapidity, if not with the rapidity which is one of the most startling legends of his biography.

The authorised biography tells us that the verse flowed from Morris's pen, and that he once composed seven hundred lines in a single day. That is, of course, practically at the rate of a line a minute for twelve solid hours, without allowing more than a quarter of an hour for food. Even if we rob him of his sleep and allow him the full twenty-four hours

in which to work, it means that he composed a rhymed line of verse every two minutes over the whole time. The legend is probably to be explained by the existence of a certain number of lines, in the rough, when that strenuous day began. The fact remains, however, that his method, the tenuity of his lines, and his lower scale of poetic values, added greatly to the ease and therefore to the rapidity of his work. The ease which he derived from his lower scale is exactly analogous to that of a singer who lowers the key of a song in order to get through it without undue exertion; while it is obvious that the tenuity of his verse gives it something of the facility of prose. Here we have, roughly, the explanation why Morris, even with all his huge energy, was able to complete so rapidly between 1865 and 1870 that tremendous tapestry of music which he called *The Earthly Paradise*, a tapestry woven of over 42,000 lines of rhymed verse. "Every evening he would read aloud what he had written that day," it is said of that happy time in Oxford. By the early part of 1868, seventeen tales out of the proposed twenty-four had been written. It was at first proposed to produce the work in one folio volume with woodcuts from designs by Burne-Jones, of which there were to be five hundred. A great many of these Burne-Jones actually made; but at that time it was almost impossible to get the drawings properly cut; and though Morris, with his usual fighting spirit, made valiant efforts to cut them with his own hand, the great scheme had to be laid aside for that time. The first part of *The Earthly Paradise* was published in 1868 by Mr. F. S. Ellis in a simple form. But at the author's death his dream of

the great edition was on the verge of being realised. "To the very last," wrote Burne-Jones, "we held to our first idea, and hoped yet to see the book published in the Kelmscott Press in all the fulness of its first design."

At the end of this year, with his poetry in full flow for *The Earthly Paradise*, and his decorative work still in full swing at Bloomsbury, Morris began to study Icelandic with Mr. Magnusson, and went systematically through the bulk of its heroic literature. In January 1869, Morris and Magnusson published a translation of the *Saga of Gunnlaug Worm-tongue*. In the poems which Morris wrote about this time for *The Earthly Paradise*—*Bellerophon* and *The Lovers of Gudrun*—the first results of his Icelandic studies began to show themselves, his treatment of these two stories being epic rather than romantic.

The great theme of *The Earthly Paradise* is precisely the same as that of *Jason*, the simple desire of man to escape death, and his recognition of the fact that his little life perhaps owes its sweetness to its brevity. But in *The Earthly Paradise* the theme is elaborated, and the theory is recognised as so true that its laws are applied to the work itself. The beauty and sweetness of the tales composing the work are dependent to a certain extent on the profound sadness of their setting, which is provided by the prologue, the exquisite interludes, the epilogue, and the farewell salute to Chaucer, with their perpetually recurrent burden, in a hundred varied forms:

> Of Heaven or Hell I have no power to sing,
> I cannot ease the burden of your fears,
> Or make quick-coming death a little thing,

Or bring again the pleasure of past years,
Not for my words shall ye forget your tears
Or hope again for aught that I can say,
The idle singer of an empty day.

But rather, when aweary of your mirth,
From full hearts still unsatisfied ye sigh,
And, feeling kindly unto all the earth,
Grudge every minute as it passes by,
Made the more mindful that the sweet days die—
Remember me a little then I pray,
The idle singer of an empty day.

The heavy trouble, the bewildering care
That weighs us down who live and earn our bread,
These idle verses have no power to bear;
So let me sing of names remembered,
Because they, living not, can ne'er be dead,
Or long time take their memory quite away
From us poor singers of an empty day.

Dreamer of dreams, born out of my due time,
Why should I strive to set the crooked straight?
Let it suffice me that my murmuring rhyme
Beats with light wing against the ivory gate,
Telling a tale not too importunate
To those who in the sleepy region stay,
Lulled by the singer of an empty day.

The Prologue, entitled *The Wanderers*, tells how certain adventurers in the Middle Ages took ship from a land stricken with the Black Death and sailed across the Atlantic in search of an Earthly Paradise where they believed they might find eternal youth and escape death altogether. They find, not that deathless country, but a nameless city in a distant sea, inhabited by Greeks, descendants of early Greek voyagers who had settled there in despair of ever seeing their native land again, and have preserved in their isolation the pure and living traditions of early Greece. The

mediæval voyagers who happened on this white faërie city, with its marble palaces and temples of the ancient gods, are of Norse, Germanic, and Breton origin, familiar with the mediæval chronicles and tales. They tell their adventures to the elders of the Greek city with all the naïve pathos of their quest. They are regarded by the elders with pity and love, as a link between themselves and the old world they have lost, and this at once supplies the motive for the series of tales with which they regale one another, after the fashion of the Canterbury Pilgrims or the dwellers in the death-surrounded garden of Boccaccio.

> There spoke an ancient man, the land's chief priest,
> Who said, "Dear guests, the year begins to-day,
> And fain are we, before it pass away,
> To hear some tales of that now altered world,
> Wherefrom our fathers in old time were hurled
> By the hard hands of fate and destiny.
> Nor would ye hear perchance unwillingly
> How we have dealt with stories of the land
> Wherein the tombs of our forefathers stand:
> Wherefore henceforth two solemn feasts shall be
> In every month, at which some history
> Shall crown our joyance; and this day, indeed,
> I have a story ready for our need,
> If ye will hear it."

Thereupon he proceeds to tell the story of *Atalanta's Race*, which is followed in turn by a Wanderer's story of *The Man born to be King*; and the scheme is carried out through all the months of the year, the twenty-four tales being connected by interludes descriptive of the gatherings during these respective months, or descriptive of the months themselves and their changes and the changes they involve in the tellers of the

stories. It is an elaboration of an idea suggested by Keats in *Endymion*:

> I will begin
> Now while I cannot hear the city's din;
> Now while the early budders are just new,
> And run in mazes of the youngest hue
> About old forests; while the willow trails
> Its delicate amber; and the dairy pails
> Bring home increase of milk. And, as the year
> Grows lush in juicy stalks, I'll smoothly steer
> My little boat, for many quiet hours,
> With streams that deepen freshly into bowers.
> Many and many a verse I hope to write,
> Before the daisies, vermeil rimm'd and white,
> Hide in deep herbage; and ere yet the bees
> Hum about globes of clover and sweet peas,
> I must be near the middle of my story.
> O may no wintry season, bare and hoary,
> See it half finished: but let Autumn bold,
> With universal tinge of sober gold,
> Be all about me when I make an end.
>
> *Endymion*, Book I.

Morris uses this idea with supreme skill, and succeeds in conveying to us an extraordinarily vivid sense of the passage of time in a sort of processional pomp before the unchanging tapestries of those immortal stories which "living not, can ne'er be dead." Taken out of their setting, these stories are still as beautiful, almost every one, as *The Life and Death of Jason*; but taken in their setting, as they ought to be, for the whole work is a single masterly piece of poetic design, they become something more. There is an interplay between them and the passing pageant of lives and loves and seasons.

These gloriously coloured tapestries hanging upon the walls of that silent golden palace of song criticise

life as does the *Ode on a Grecian Urn.* These Greek and mediæval lovers, these slim, thinly-clad girls in sunny places, poised in unchanging beauty, as they pluck the golden apples from the Trees of Life in the enchanted Gardens of their Paradise, indeed "tease us out of thought as doth Eternity":

> Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
> Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve;
> She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
> For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

The first interlude, which begins the passing mortal pageant between the narrative of the Wanderers and the story of Atalanta's race, opens with a glorious cry to March, in which month the tale-telling begins:

> Slayer of the winter, art thou here again?

It states the recurrent theme of these interludes very beautifully:

> Yea, welcome, March! and though I die ere June,
> Yet for the hope of life I give thee praise,
> Striving to swell the burden of the tune
> That even now I hear thy brown birds raise,
> Unmindful of the past or coming days;
> Who sing: "O joy! a new year is begun:
> What happiness to look upon the sun!"
>
> *Ah, what begetteth all this storm of bliss*
> *But Death himself, who crying solemnly,*
> *E'en from the heart of sweet Forgetfulness,*
> *Bids us "Rejoice, lest pleasureless ye die.*
> *Within a little time must ye go by.*
> *Stretch forth your open hands, and while ye live*
> *Take all the gifts that Death and Life may give."*

The lyrical effect of these interludes is intensified by the fact that many of them are personal utterances—

glimpses of Morris's own life, recollections of golden afternoons on the river above Oxford, that "lonely, far-off mother of the Thames," when he was composing his great poem or reading it aloud to his wife and friends:

> Fair was the morn to-day, the blossom's scent
> Floated across the fresh grass, and the bees
> With low vexed song from rose to lily went; . . .
> And thine eyes shone with joyous memories;
> Fair was the early morn, and fair wert thou,
> And I was happy—Ah, be happy now!

Sometimes they contain exquisite landscapes, as in the picture of August—landscapes which in themselves are enough to give Morris a very high place among English "nature-poets":

> Now came fulfilment of the year's desire,
> The tall wheat, coloured by the August fire,
> Grew heavy-headed, dreading its decay,
> And blacker grew the elm-trees day by day.
> About the edges of the yellow corn,
> And o'er the gardens grown somewhat outworn,
> The bees went hurrying to fill up their store;
> The apple-boughs bent over more and more;
> With peach and apricot the garden wall
> Was odorous, and the pears began to fall
> From off the high tree with each freshening breeze.

And in all the sense of constant change is subtly conveyed with extraordinary power. The weight of the poem, its deepest passion, and, indeed, its most careful craftsmanship, is in these interludes. Their method is slightly different from that of the tales: the lines are not so thin, there is more concentration and lyrical intensity. Morris would seem to have planned this deliberately; for the tales themselves are more tapestry-like than ever. The narrator makes no comments.

The invocation to Chaucer is removed to the Epilogue; or he is allowed to appear in the Prologue as a picturesque figure, beside the clear Thames, with his pen moving over bills of lading. More strictly than ever in the tales themselves does Morris keep to his low scale of poetic values, with the fullest justification in their resultant wealth of lucid colour, simplicity, directness, and noble purity of line.

Of the twenty-four tales, twelve are derived from Greek mythology, of course, according to the scheme; and the other twelve from Norse or mediæval sources. *The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon* owes its origin to Thorpe's *Yuletide Stories*, one of Morris's favourite books at Oxford; but the story as told by Morris varies considerably from the original, and has slips of a French romance and of the *Arabian Nights* grafted on to it. Two stories are taken from Mandeville, while others are derived from Thorpe's *Northern Mythology*, the *Gesta Romanorum*, William of Malmesbury's *De Gesta Regum Anglorum*, and French romances. *The Hill of Venus* was derived from Tieck's Romances, and *The Man who never Laughed Again* from the *Arabian Nights*. *The Lovers of Gudrun* came from the Icelandic *Laxdœla Saga*. It is impossible, of course, in the space at our command, to examine these stories in detail. He employs only three metres (apart from the occasional songs) throughout the whole work. One of these is the Chaucerian seven-lined stanza, of which we have quoted the introductory examples. The bulk of the work, however, is in pentameter couplets like those of *Jason*; and to break the monotony of these there are several stories in the short octosyllabic couplet which, in *Jason*,

he employed so effectively as a song-measure. The tales in this metre are perhaps his least successful; for lyrical purposes it suits him admirably, as in the song of the nymph to Hylas, quoted in an earlier chapter. But it moves rather too quickly in narrative for him to be able to get the effects upon which he so largely depends, and his dreamy wistfulness of phrase vanishes into something like conscious archaism. Of the Greek stories, that of *Cupid and Psyche* is perhaps the most beautiful version ever done. Ablaze with colour from beginning to end, it is one of the most delicately sensuous poems ever written. Its beauties are almost bewildering in their multitude: the whole description of Psyche's trembling and wondering entrance into the lonely, deserted palace of Cupid is a maze of loveliness.

It has, moreover, all the curious and vivid realism which, as we said above, results from Morris's method. The appeal to our senses is heightened very much by the supreme success with which in this case he avoids direct description. In a former page we pointed out the similar skill and subtlety in presentment of the story of Hylas. Here, however, the skill manifested is even greater. A critic of our time has said that—

> In the quality of richness Shakespeare stood quite alone till the publication of *Endymion*. When we think of Shakespeare, it is his richness more than even his higher qualities that we think of first. In reading him, we feel at every turn that we have come upon a mind as rich as Marlowe's Moor, who
>
> > Without control can pick his riches up,
> > And in his house heap pearls, like pebble-stones.
>
> . . . His riches burden him. And no wonder: it is stiff flying with the ruby hills of Badakhstan on your back.

Nevertheless, so strong are the wings of his imagination, so lordly is his intellect, that he can carry them all; he could carry, it would seem, every gem in Golconda, every gem in every planet from here to Neptune, and yet win his goal. Now, in the matter of richness this is the great difference between him and Keats, the wings of whose imagination, aerial at starting, and only iridescent like the sails of a dragon-fly, seem to change as he goes—become overcharged with beauty, in fact—"a-bloom with splendid dyes, as are the tiger-moth's deep damasked wings." Or rather, it may be said that he seems to start sometimes with Shakespeare's own eagle-pinions, which, as he mounts, catch and retain colour after colour from the earth below, till, heavy with beauty as the drooping wings of a golden pheasant, they fly low and level at last over the earth they cannot leave for its loveliness, not even for the holiness of the skies.

The comparison is exquisite, and it is equally true if we substitute Morris for Keats (with regard to this tale of *Cupid and Psyche*), except for the fact that Morris does carry all his riches with as great ease as Shakespeare, and flies low and level deliberately, not because he is weighed down with beauty, but for sheer love of that clinging loveliness of the earth; while, unlike Keats, he infallibly wins his goal. The riches that are heaped up for us in his palace of Cupid seem almost too great for any wings to carry. There is no poem in any language so full of material, earthly loveliness. Riches are heaped on riches, in a way that would inevitably cloy if they were given to us by any other method than that of Morris. Any direct description of that miraculous palace, containing a tithe of the details which he contrives to reveal to us, would surfeit the veriest glutton of beauty. But with supreme skill Morris marshals all his details in a lucid and logical order (quite beyond the grasp of Keats in narrative

poetry), and presents them to us indirectly, as the tale proceeds, through the senses of Psyche, thus making the matter one of human sympathy as well as of sensuous delight. All the rays of beauty are focussed and concentrated on the wandering central figure. Treated in any other way, they would have been merely a beautiful dissipation of the story and of the reader's interest. A notable instance of the same device occurs in Tennyson's *Recollections of the Arabian Nights*. There, too, great numbers of gorgeous details are held together, though more loosely, by a central figure; and when in the climax of the poem, written as it is on a higher scale of values than that of Morris, Tennyson wishes to suggest the myriad aspects of life itself, the passions and pleasures and tragedies that surge and seethe beneath and around the moonéd domes and streaming crescents of the roofs of Bagdat, with his infallible art he allows not the slightest digression from the main stream of his poem, but concentrates his spiritual details more closely than ever, and this time upon a still smaller figure, a figure hardly larger than a girl's clenched hand; for he transmits them to us through the throbbing throat of a single secret bird:—

> And where the lemon grove
> In closest coverture upsprung,
> The living airs of middle night
> *Died round the bulbul as he sung;*
> *Not he: but something which possess'd*
> *The darkness of the world, delight,*
> *Life, anguish, death, immortal love,*
> *Ceasing not, mingled, unrepress'd,*
> *Apart from place, withholding time,*
> *But flattering the golden prime*
> *Of good Haroun Alraschid.*

Keats, in his narrative poems, is full of beautiful digressions. It is the chief reason of the comparative failure of *Endymion*. On the other hand, the *Ode to a Nightingale* and the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, perhaps on the whole his greatest works, are perfect examples of this concentration of the most varied and distant details by means of a central figure :—

> Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird !
> No hungry generations tread thee down ;
> The voice I hear this passing night was heard
> In ancient days by emperor and clown :
> Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
> Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
> She stood in tears amid the alien corn ;
> The same that oft-times hath
> Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
> Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

"The same"! With what unerring precision of rhythm is he called back to it, as if his metre were veritably measured by the beatings of the throat of the nightingale, and each momentary digression but the trembling away of a note into infinity. His *Ode to Psyche* is more discursive, and to just that extent it is comparatively a failure. The *Cupid and Psyche* of Morris, however, is a perfect example in narrative of this concentration of detail around a single figure—a concentration made the more effective by the supreme skill with which the details are marshalled in their logical order as the tale progresses, and are only revealed to us with the onward movement of the central figure, step by step, to its goal. The result is a lucidity unmatched by any other poem with anything like its wealth and exuberance of—we were about to say "ornament," but it is much

more than that. For ornament is external; and the material details of his poem meant more than mere decoration to Morris, writing as he was on that lower scale of values where they have something of a symbolic nature. Just as the song of Keats's nightingale sums up the world and utters it to the glory of Eternity, so are the material details of this tale transfigured by the touch of Psyche. There is an ebb and flow between them and the spiritual world, and the whole body and spirit of the poem become an organic unity. We are told that Morris, when dyeing silks for embroideries, obtained a peculiar beauty of colour that none of his workmen could obtain and that no one else in modern times has ever obtained. His amethysts and golds and greens were different, subtly, from anything of the kind ever seen; and one special sort of his gold, "when spread out in large rich hanks, looked like a sunset sky." And so it is in his poetry, which, it can never be repeated too often, if he is to be judged aright, is written on the low scale of values proper to tapestry. His golden ornaments have that something in their gold whose dwelling is the light of setting suns. The subject of the tale of *Cupid and Psyche* is in such perfect accord with Morris's method that it becomes almost an allegory of it. We must be content, it seems to suggest, with our low scale of values; and we must never light our lamps to look upon the god that gives us all this material beauty. A material beauty, we say, but it has the strangeness which Walter Pater (and Francis Bacon before him) declared to be essential to the highest beauty. It is so not for the strangeness' sake, but because that beauty is a transfiguration. If there is any more perfect

type of that spiritual strangeness than this palace of Cupid into which the trembling Psyche wanders alone, it must be far to seek. How much it includes—the birth of the soul, the dawning of love, the rediscovery that roses are red and white, and that the world is one stupendous miracle! It is a type, in short, of the Romantic Revival, a stage more advanced than before.

And there is not one direct attempt to make the surroundings appear miraculous or enchanted, except the purely negative fact of the young god's invisibility. With perfect control over his imagination, Morris keeps to his low scale of richly-coloured earthly beauty, and the result is a Renascence of Wonder with regard to the material details themselves. We come to look upon some richly-wrought golden beaker with the same joy that Wordsworth found in the celandine or the daffodil; and over some curiously-coloured web woven in lands across the sea we are stirred by the same subtle soul of romance that moved for Marlowe in the mere names of those distant lands or cities—names that move with all their ringing syllables like "a bronze-harnessed soldiery, sounding and sunlit," treading roads of immortal marble, and riding in triumph through Persepolis. And of this process of transfiguration the picture of Psyche, the soul of the tale, wandering through the details of that exquisite palace of song, is surely, as we said, something like an allegory. Every detail is brought into contact with her as the central and life-giving figure. We see her—the animating spirit—pausing at the great lonely porch of that dead mass of material splendour. We see her enter—an incarnation! The golden hangings rustle around her as she pauses

and stands and tries to still the beating of her heart, and hears the roses beating against the panes. We are made to see the wonders of the place through her own eyes, as she catches glimpses of her face in the silver mirrors—her face

Grown strange to her amidst that loneliness.

We see her stooping to feel the web under her feet, "wrought by the brown, slim-fingered Indian" in distant lands, or feeling the figures on the hangings with her little white hand, and daintily smelling the unknown blossoms that colour the air all about her. We see her touching rich vessels and trying to make out the meaning of strange images of knight and king and queen. We see her passing bubbles of delicate glass-work across her smooth cheek, and coming into the chamber which is paven cunningly to look like a glassy pool with red fish swimming in it through floating weed. We see her kneel down and take off her sandals, and the shadow of a smile cross her face as her feet meet only their own white reflection in the glassy floor. We see her, a strange little lonely Greek girl in that vast palace, looking longingly at the table she finds spread with dainty food and vessels the meanest of which was beaten gold; but not daring to eat, till a strange voice—though no one was nigh—trembles through the air with her name, bidding her sit down and have no fear. We are touched by the childlike trust and pagan naïveté with which she obeys, losing her fear at once and hearing now no more than the summer sound of the garden without. We are glad that, when her meal is done, she is able to sit, happy and

fearless, in a pleasant window-seat to watch the sun, as it sinks, changing the garden-shadows. Even the twilight picture without is suggested to us most subtly in direct relation to Psyche:

> She grew
> Fearless and happy, since she deemed she knew
> The worst that could befall, *while still the best*
> *Shone a fair star far off.*

She thinks that to complete her exquisite contentment—for something, she knows not what, is still lacking—it would be sweet to hear music—music to drown the tune of the bees within the flowering limes. And immediately, answering the thought, like a softly-swelling orchestra answering the cry of a violin, an unseen choir hushes the faint music of the linden trees with a song—a song which, to this exquisite love-poem, is something like what the Pilgrims' Chorus is to Wagner's *Tannhäuser*. It tells her of the love which is dawning for her with the setting of the sun—love with its regrets and wonders and immortal longings, love of which she has so little knowledge that the music suggests no more to her than the unfathomed sweetness of the world; while, for the reader himself, the refrain of the song subtly carries the burden of the whole book, and tells of the mortal pageant passing by, with "the idle singer of an empty day":—

> O pensive, tender maid, downcast and shy,
> Who turnest pale e'en at the name of love,
> And with flushed face must pass the elm-tree by,
> Ashamed to hear the passionate grey dove
> Moan to his mate, thee too the god shall move,
> Thee too the maidens shall ungird one day,
> And with thy girdle put thy shame away.

What then, and shall white winter ne'er be done
Because the glittering frosty morn is fair?
Because against the early-setting sun
Bright show the gilded boughs, though waste and bare?
Because the robin singeth free from care?
Ah! these are memories of a better day
When on earth's face the lips of summer lay.

Come then, beloved one, for such as thee
Love loveth, and their hearts he knoweth well,
Who hoard their moments of felicity,
As misers hoard the medals that they tell,
Lest on the earth but paupers they should dwell:
"We hide our love to bless another day;
The world is hard, youth passes quick," they say.

Ah, little ones, but if ye could forget
Amidst your outpoured love that you must die,
Then ye, my servants, were death's conqueror's yet,
And love to you should be eternity,
How quick soever might the days go by:
Yes, ye are made immortal on the day
Ye cease the dusty grains of time to weigh.

Thou hearkenest, love? O, make no semblance then
That thou art loved, but as thy custom is
Turn thy grey eyes away from eyes of men.
With hands down-dropped, that tremble with thy bliss,
With hidden eyes, take thy first lover's kiss;
Call this eternity which is to-day,
Nor dream that this our love can pass away.

With *The Lovers of Gudrun* a new era begins in Morris's poetry. It is his first essay in epic. *Cupid and Psyche* may be compared with Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*. Both have the brightness, richness, softness, and a little of the cruelty of the South. *The Lovers of Gudrun* is to these almost as *King Lear* is to *Romeo and Juliet*. It has all the darkness, grandeur, tempestuous passion, and deep-hearted tenderness of the North. We have heard Mr. Swinburne express his opinion that

The Lovers of Gudrun is decidedly the finest of all Morris's poems. Certainly there are passages in it which rise higher and go deeper than any others in *The Earthly Paradise*; and therefore, as one might expect, Mr. Swinburne's judgment on this matter may be accepted. But *The Lovers of Gudrun* has serious faults. Its structure is unwieldy, and it is at least twice as long as it ought to be. Its outlines are a little blurred, and it has not the directness and lucidity in narration which we associate with most of Morris's tales. The opening of the tale puts a strain upon the reader's attention at once with its complicated (or rather blurred) genealogy, and this, combined with its length, will probably make it the most commonly "skipped" of all the stories in *The Earthly Paradise.*

The prophecy of Guest with regard to Gudrun's dreams is a very dreary and lengthy business at best, and there is something flat about the dreams themselves. The representation of Gudrun's future lovers by the coif which she cast into the water, the ring which she broke, and the helm which she lost has touches of something like stupidity where one would desire simplicity or impressive suggestion. It is like a tale told by a stupid improvisator who does not quite know what he is going to say next. Even the style becomes flat and unreal. There is something unsatisfactory, for instance, in a dream so very arbitrary as this:

> "Methought I had a helm upon my head,
> Wrought all of gold, with precious gems beset,
> And pride and joy I had therein, and yet,
> So heavy was it, that I scarce might hold
> My head upright for that great weight of gold;

> Yet for all that I laid no blame or wrong
> Upon it, and I fain had kept it long;
> *But amid this, while least I looked therefor,*
> *Something, I knew not what, the fair helm tore*
> *From off mine head, and then I saw it swept*
> *Into the firth,* and when I would have wept
> Then my voice failed me."

That is not at all like a dream, and yet it is constructed on the dream-plan. Where it fails it is difficult to say. We have only to compare it with such a dream as that of Shakespeare's Clarence to see how entirely lacking it is in the right tragic note which Morris presumably desired to strike. Moreover, the three dreams are far too much alike in their machinery to bear the dull burden of their variously forced incidents. They have none of the wild logic of dreams. When blood flows from the broken places of the ring, we are aware at once that something is wrong, and it does not impress us as would blood spouting from the lopped limb of a tree in hell which we had suddenly discovered to have a tangled beard and the head of a tortured human being. The ring is too small or artificial or something of that sort. At any rate, the whole impression we derive from the first two or three hundred lines of this poem is that of a tale told by the stupid improvisator aforesaid. There is no other way of describing its peculiar flatness. In fact, it is not till the story has almost arrived at the end of its first thousand lines that it begins to move with power. But from that point onward—though the original Icelandic story has undoubtedly encumbered Morris in certain passages and loaded the poem with superfluous and sometimes diffuse details—the main current of the poem is one of matchless passion and

splendour. One may wish that Gudrun had not married quite so often (one almost loses count of her husbands before the end of the poem), and one cannot help unconsciously discounting even her magnificent final love-speech in view of the facts. Modern readers will not so easily sympathise with her as the pagan naïveté of Morris apparently could. To ourselves there is something a little revolting in her bland survey of the dead men and final appraisement of their respective merits in her old age. There is a ghastly kind of unconscious humour behind it. But the story has to be regarded from another point of view—that of a man who was in love with her. Even if reason tells us that Gudrun was little better than a Titanic harlot, one has also to admit that this type of woman has enslaved men from the days of Lilith to the days of Mary Stuart; and the power with which Morris renders the tragic love of the two foster-brothers, Kiartan and Bodli, for Gudrun, is enough to overwhelm criticism.

The central situation is this. Kiartan, with whom Gudrun is passionately in love, goes on a voyage to Norway with his foster-brother and dear friend Bodli, who secretly loves Gudrun. Kiartan is temporarily attracted by a king's daughter in Norway and stays there, while Bodli returns home, loyal enough to his friend and full of pity for Gudrun, whom he marries after she has found out what both of them believe to be the truth about Kiartan.

Kiartan awakens from his daydream in Norway and returns. Bodli has always loved Gudrun more than Kiartan was even capable of loving her. The two men, moreover, have always loved each other, and so the

pity of it begins; and it is a tale of pity unsurpassed except in Shakespeare. Gudrun appears to Bodli as he sits in his deserted hall and upbraids him bitterly:

> "I came again
> Because I lay awake, and thought how men
> Have told of traitors, and I needs must see
> How such an one to-night would look to me.
> Night hides thee not, O Bodli Thorleikson,
> Nor shall death hide from thee what thou hast done.
> What! thou art grown afraid, thou tremblest then . . .
> I curse thee. . . ."
>
> Breathless she stopped, but Bodli helplessly
> Put forth his hands till he gained speech, and said
> In a low voice, "Would God that I were dead!
> And yet a word from him I hope to have
> Kinder than this before I reach the grave."

That indicates one of the marvels of this poem—indeed, we may say the crowning beauty of the poem—the extraordinary power with which Morris develops the love of Bodli for his friend simultaneously with the course of both men's tragic love for Gudrun. Bodli is a figure of almost sublime pathos, as Gudrun leads him through all the hells of torture.

> "Who can tell,
> O Bodli Thorleikson, but down in hell
> We twain shall love, and love, and love again,
> When the first wave of the eternal pain
> Has washed our folly from us, and I know
> Why upon earth I loved a weak heart so
> That loved me not, while I was ice to thee,
> O loving lovesome traitor."
> Wearily
> She hung her head with parted lips awhile;
> Silent she sat, until a bitter smile
> Bemocked her face: "Yet if I call thee love,
> And kiss thee with sweet kisses, such as move

Great men to great deeds, trust me not too much,
But think of honied words and tremulous touch
As things that slay. If Kiartan lay there dead,
How I should love him!"

There is a magnificent picture of real epic grandeur where Bodli, weary of his life, attempts to win death from the hands of Kiartan, who nevertheless forces him to live and bids his men thrust Bodli back with the hedge of their strong shields. This leads up to the finest part of the whole poem. There are few passages in English literature so moving as the description of Bodli's second attempt to die by the hand of Kiartan—an attempt which results in the death of Kiartan himself. In the early morning of that day Gudrun woke to see the haggard face of Bodli o'er her own.

"I go," he said;
"Would God that thou mayst hear of me as dead
Ere the sun sets to-day."
She passed her hand
Across her eyes, as he in arms did stand
Before her there, and stared but answered not,
As though indeed his face were clean forgot;
Yet her face quickened as his eyes she saw
So full of ruth yet nigher to her draw:
She shrank aback, but therewith suddenly
A thought smote through her, with an angry cry
She sprang up from the bed, naked and white,
Her gold hair glittering in the sunshine bright
That flooded all the place; his arm she caught
And stared into his eyes:
"What is thy thought?"
She said, "why goest thou with these murderous men?
Ah! dost thou think thou yet mayst save him then?
Ah! dost thou think that thou mayst still be kind
To every one, fool as thou art and blind,
Yet work thy wicked will to pleasure thee?

Simple, yet extraordinarily subtle, is the psychology of these passages; and it may be doubted whether the war of instincts in a woman's mind has ever been rendered more faithfully. The extraordinary tangle of emotions in the last four lines of the passage above is something without a parallel in English before the time of Morris, if we except Shakespeare only. It is a piece from life itself. It is hardly conscious of its subtlety. It is the voice of the woman herself. The parting of Bodli and Gudrun which follows is also surely a fragment from life itself:—

> She fell aback nor noted more, but lay
> All huddled up upon the bed, her hair
> O'er her white body scattered here and there,
> And as he gazed on her he saw she wept,
> And a wild passion o'er his heart there swept,
> And twice he stretched his arms out, to embrace
> His curse and his delight, twice turned his face
> Unto the door that led unto the hall,
> Then with a cry upon her did he fall
> And, sobbing, strained her to his mail-clad breast,
> And to her writhen lips his lips he pressed,
> And moaned o'er her wet cheeks, and kissed her eyes
> That knew him not. . . .
> And she, she knew him not, her arms fell down
> Away from him, her drawn mouth and set frown
> Were not for him, she did not shrink from him,
> She turned not round to curse or bless. . . .
> Wildly he cried: "Oh, Gudrun, thou hast lost,
> But look on me for I have never won!"
> Then from the place he rushed, and with the sun
> Burst into the dusk hall, a stream of light,
> Neath his dark hair, his face so strange and white
> That a dead man dragged up into the day
> By wizard's arts he seemed to be, and they
> Who waited armed there, and the last cup drank,
> Looked each at each, and from his presence shrank.

The meeting of Bodli and Kiartan is, of course, the climax of the poem, and it is told with splendid power and passion, and, above all, with that world-embracing pity which is one of the poet's divinest gifts. Bodli, though smitten in the face by the red hand of Ospak and taunted with cowardice, has not yet lifted his sword in the fray.

> But now loud and clear
> Kiartan cried out his name from that high place,
> And at the first sound Bodli turned his face
> This way and that, in puzzled hapless wise,
> Till 'twixt the spears his eyes met Kiartan's eyes;
> Then his mouth quivered, and he writhed aside,
> And with his mail-clad hands his face did hide,
> And trembled like one palsy-struck, while high
> Over the doubtful field did Kiartan cry:
>
> "Yea, they are right! be not so hardly moved,
> O kinsman, foster-brother, friend beloved
> Of the old days, friend well forgiven now!
> Come nigher, come, that thou my face mayst know,
> Then draw thy sword and thrust from off the earth
> The fool that so hath spoilt thy days of mirth,
> Win long lone days of love by Gudrun's side!
> My life is spoilt, why longer do I bide
> To vex thee, friend?—strike then for happy life!
> I said thou mightst not gaze upon the strife
> Far off; bethink thee then, who sits at home
> And waits thee, Gudrun, mine own love, and come,
> Come, for the midday sun is over bright,
> And I am wearying for the restful night!"

Bodli kills Kiartan and is left alone with the body, crying, "What have I done to thee?"

> "Where was thy noble sword I looked to take
> Here in my breast, and die for Gudrun's sake,
> And for thy sake—O friend, am I forgot?
> Speak yet a word!"

But Kiartan answered not,
And Bodli said, "Wilt thou not then forgive?
Think of the days I yet may have to live
Of hard life!"

In lines like these we are, surely, approaching the heights of "Absent thee from felicity awhile," and yet again he comes back to the old theme:

"Perchance it is that thou art far away
From us already; caring nought at all
For what in after days to us may fall—
O piteous, piteous!—yet perchance it is
That thou, though entering on thy life of bliss,
The meed of thy great heart, yet art anear,
And somewhat of my feeble voice canst hear. . . .
Kiartan, she is changed to thee;
Yea, and since hope is dead changed too to me,
What shall we do, if, each of each forgiven,
We three shall meet at last in that fair heaven
The new faith tells of? Thee and God I pray
Impute it not for sin to me to-day,
If no thought I can shape thereof but this:
O friend, O friend, when thee I meet in bliss,
Wilt thou not give my love Gudrun to me,
Since now indeed thine eyes made clear can see
That I of all the world must love her most?"

Piteous indeed it is with a piteousness to which our literature can hardly afford a parallel. With the grand tragic picture of the tall, black-robed Gudrun in the cold grey porch of Bathstead, waiting the arrival of the dead body, while the dying sunlight drifts over her grey face, the poem should perhaps have been nearer than it is to its end. For Morris takes more than five hundred lines to bring it to its close. The heights of the poem are in the final passages between Bodli and Kiartan. There is something ignoble (for all the tigerish glamour

with which the Pre-Raphaelites would always invest that type of woman)—there is something almost mean in the very conception of a creature so gluttonously over-sexed and selfishly serpentine as Gudrun.

The comparison may seem curious, but it is illuminating to set by the side of this epic of sexual warfare a simple ballad telling a somewhat similar story, like *Auld Robin Gray*. The essential meanness and ignobility of Gudrun with her sheaf of lovers immediately leaps to light. There is nothing splendid about her but her skin, and her supple sleekness as of a wild beast. The true comment on the situation—if heroes must trifle with such perilous creatures—is undoubtedly that of Mr. Swinburne.

> No soul she hath, we see, to outlive her
> Hath she for that no lips to kiss?

But she is not an adequate cause for all that anguish and spiritual bloodshed; and it is a remarkable fact that it is only the Pre-Raphaelite school, with their "æsthetic" descendants, that ever mistook her for such a cause. Achilles wept for Briseis, but that is quite a different matter from this sexual domination, this reduction of manhood to a pulp and life itself to a dilemma. Browning paints us an Ottima, but she does not crush the whole world beneath her naked foot like some horrible female Juggernaut, under the smallest of whose toes the poet can only utter one despairing squeak and die like a mouse. There is something unbalanced in the view of life which admits such creations as the whole truth. Gudrun is, for instance, far more to blame than Bodli for their hasty marriage.

The results should have been Circean or farcical, we feel, rather than heroic. Against this we must, in the case of Morris, again remember that he is writing on a lower scale of values than most other poets, and that his great tapestry-like effects may very largely be taken as conventions for something higher. More than ever does he aim at that naïve simplicity in *The Earthly Paradise.* And the final picture of the Icelandic story, *The Lovers of Gudrun*, is undoubtedly a masterpiece of its kind—a masterpiece that makes us forget to reason about the story itself and resign ourselves to the fact that, after all, every newspaper tells us what a pitiful tangle of motives and passions the world is and has always been. Gudrun, in her old age, has been asked by her son which of her lovers she loved best:

> She turned, until her sightless eyes did gaze
> As though the wall, the hills, must melt away,
> And show her Herdholt in the twilight grey;
> She cried, with tremulous voice, and eyes grown wet
> For the last time, whate'er should happen yet,
> With hands stretched out for all that she had lost:
>
> "*I did the worst to him I loved the most.*"

It is a great picture. It does not tell us that the world is such stuff as dreams are made on, but it makes us feel it, and we see the cloudy rack dissolving away around Gudrun with her arms outstretched in immortal longing. And under these great eternal tapestries passes the fleeting human pageant, as revealed in Morris's interludes—exquisite little poems containing perhaps the truest expression of his real self. "Look out upon the real world," he cries, "where the moon, between root and crown of these high trees, turns the

dead midnight into dreamy noon; is it not fair, and of most wondrous worth?"

> Yea, I have looked, and seen November there;
> The changeless seal of change it seemed to be,
> Fair death of things that, living once, were fair;
> Bright sign of loneliness too great for me,
> Strange image of the dread eternity,
> In whose void patience how can these have part,
> These outstretched feverish hands, this restless heart?

It is obvious how these personal utterances are intended to contrast with Morris's pictures of those who "living not, could ne'er be dead." The contrast is emphasised by the fact that the scenery of the interludes is usually modern and English throughout, the burden is the same—the burden of quick-coming death, of joy, whose hand is ever at his lips bidding adieu, and the whole work is bound together all the more strongly by the appearance of the same burden in the songs within the tales themselves.

Since the Elizabethans there have been few more perfect songs than this instance of it, from *Ogier the Dane*:

> HÆC.
>
> In the white-flowered hawthorn-brake,
> Love, be merry for my sake;
> Twine the blossoms in my hair,
> Kiss me where I am most fair—
> Kiss me, love! for who knoweth
> What thing cometh after death?
>
> ILLE.
>
> Nay, the garlanded gold hair
> Hides thee where thou art most fair;
> Hides the rose-tinged hills of snow—
> Ah, sweet love, I have thee now!
> Kiss me, love! for who knoweth
> What thing cometh after death?

HÆC.

Shall we weep for a dead day,
Or set Sorrow in our way?
Hidden by my golden hair,
Wilt thou weep that sweet days wear?
Kiss me, love! for who knoweth
What thing cometh after death?

ILLE.

Weep, O Love, the days that flit,
Now, while I can feel thy breath;
Then may I remember it
Sad and old, and near my death.
Kiss me, love! for who knoweth
What thing cometh after death?

The Epilogue is, in a sense, an apology for this perpetual burden. Blame the Wanderers, it says, ye who have no need of life to right the blindness and the wrong of the world, ye that with no good-night can loose the hand of love. Look at this beauty of young children's mirth, it says, soon to be silenced by Death. Look at this faithful love that knows no end till—Death. Look at this hand ripening to perfect skill, this eager knowledge that would stop for nought, except for Death.

> And these folk—these poor tale-tellers, who strove
> In their wild way the heart of Death to move,
> E'en as we singers, and failed, e'en as we,—
> Surely on their side I at least will be.

Then comes the great outburst to Chaucer, in which Morris perhaps pours his heart out more completely than anywhere else. Mr. Mackail has told us with what sadness Morris came to the end of this great work, *The Earthly Paradise*, how he parted with it forlornly, as with a dear friend. "Here are we for the last time face

to face, thou and I, Book," he begins, wistfully; then bursts passionately into the old refrain:

> I love thee, whatso time or men may say
> Of the poor singer of an empty day.

And then he bids the book go on its way to the land desired, the Land of Matters Unforgot; but if it cannot reach it and must die far off from the hedge of bay, it yet may meet his Master Geoffrey Chaucer on the road, and must speak to him thus:

> "O Master, O thou great of heart and tongue,
> Thou well mayst ask me why I wander here,
> In raiment rent of stories oft besung!
> But of thy gentleness draw thou anear,
> And then the heart of one who held thee dear
> Mayst thou behold! So near as that I lay
> Unto the singer of an empty day.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> "I have beheld him tremble oft enough
> At things he could not choose but trust to me,
> Although he knew the world was wise and rough:
> And never did he fail to let me see
> His love,—his folly and faithlessness, maybe;
> And still in turn I gave him voice to pray
> Such prayers as cling about an empty day.
>
> "Thou, keen-eyed, reading me, mayst read him through,
> For surely little is there left behind;
> No power great deeds unnameable to do;
> No knowledge for which words he may not find,
> No love of things as vague as autumn wind—
> Earth of the earth lies hidden by my clay,
> The idle singer of an empty day!
>
> "Children we twain are, saith he, late made wise
> In love, but in all else most childish still,
> And seeking still the pleasure of our eyes,
> And what our ears with sweetest sounds may fill;
> Not fearing Love, lest these things he should kill;

Howe'er his pain by pleasure doth he lay,
Making a strange tale of an empty day.

"Death have we hated, knowing not what it meant;
Life have we loved, through green leaf and through sere,
Though still the less we knew of its intent:
The Earth and Heaven through countless year on year,
Slow-changing, were to us but curtains fair,
Hung round about a little room, where play
Weeping and laughter of man's empty day.

"O Master, if thine heart could love us yet,
Spite of things left undone, and wrongly done,
Some place in loving hearts then should we get,
For thou, sweet-souled, didst never stand alone,
But knew'st the joy and woe of many an one—
By lovers dead, who live through thee, we pray,
Help thou us singers of an empty day!"

So ends this immortal work, *The Earthly Paradise*, the achievement by which Morris will be chiefly known to future ages. In estimating the comparative value of the works of Morris, we should certainly take *The Earthly Paradise* as a whole and rank it as his most complete and representative achievement. It is hardly fair to him to split it up into separate tales; for it is more a unity than the *Canterbury Tales* of Chaucer. To prefer any one separate tale (even though the preference may be justifiable) is merely like preferring one pillar to another in a great cathedral.

His other works, beautiful as they may be, are not strong enough to stand by themselves; but *The Earthly Paradise* does stand by itself, like an independent literature, in a world and an atmosphere of its own. One can almost conceive it to have been indeed the work of some strange Greek nation in an unknown sea, rather than the work of one man, and one can

picture it surviving the wreck of many languages and literatures as the *Arabian Nights* and one or two collections of fairy tales will survive, with perhaps the work of half-a-dozen individual poets.

The whole effect of it is that of an immortal palace of art, down whose quiet golden corridors, hung with unchanging tapestries and eternal dreams, perpetually passes a pageant of human pleasures and pains and fears. Iceland may forget Gudrun; but her arms are stretched out for ever there towards Herdholt. Troy may not remember Helen, but the sky here does not change over the cast-back golden head of the dead Paris.

All around these immortal figures the human cloud-rack is changing and dissolving and passing away, in contrast. We see the momentary gleam of lovers' eyes and the secret clasp of their hands as they pause for a moment to look; and the brief sweetness of real life and the beauty of the deathless dreams minister to one another.

CHAPTER VI

ICELANDIC STUDIES—PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS—'SIGURD THE VOLSUNG'

In 1870, continuing the Icelandic studies which had exercised so potent an influence upon his treatment of some of the tales in *The Earthly Paradise*, and most notably upon *The Lovers of Gudrun*, Morris translated the *Volsunga Saga* in collaboration with Mr. Magnusson. It was another step towards the greatest single achievement of his later literary life.

In April of the same year he sat to Watts for the fine portrait by which he is perhaps best known to the world at large. It gives a very true idea of the broad brow under its clustering mass of upstanding and outstanding hair, the Chaucerian face, with its "demure smile and close silent eye," and a suggestion of the healthy redness of apples in the cheeks. An expression somewhat lacking in spirituality, and having a little of what Whitman would gravely call the fine aplomb of animals, together with indications of their underlying irrational restlessness, is manifest as contrasted with the face of Tennyson. But it is a fine animality, redeemed very much by the beautifully modelled mouth. This expression was accentuated, and perhaps

partly caused, by his eyes. When he was thoroughly interested in some imaginative work, some poem, for instance, that might be read to him, he would lean forward, listening intently, with their vivid blue-grey gleaming out of his ruddy face ; but at other times they seemed extremely vague and unobservant.

Burne-Jones made an interesting comment on this peculiarity :—

> When he was young he was very handsome, and yet even then his eyes were the most inexpressive I ever saw. They say nothing to you nor much look at you, but are so swift they have taken in everything there is to be seen while you are wondering when they will open. If you saw him, he wouldn't look at you, but would know everything you had on, and all your expressions, without being seen to look.

He was a man of medium height, the upper part of the body well made, though somewhat corpulent at this time. Sitting at a table, he looked magnificent, with his Viking-like head and well-proportioned shoulders ; but when he rose his height was hardly what one expected, and the lower part of his body was not so shapely or well-proportioned as the upper. He was careless about his clothes ; but it has been said that he only looked really peculiar when in conventional attire. One of the most charming of his sayings is that which he made in perfect simplicity to a friend : "You see, one can't go about London in a top hat, it looks so devilish odd." His usual dress was a suit of blue serge and a soft felt hat, in which he looked somewhat like a sailor. The story is told (but it sounds a little too like his own invention, and indeed he would have loved it to be true) that a fireman once stopped him

in Kensington High Street and said, "Beg pardon, sir, but were you ever captain of the *Sea-Swallow*?" Along with his other childlike characteristics, he had a child's capacity for getting dirty, and when he was engaged in dyeing work all appearances went to the winds. Another child's characteristic was the ungovernable temper which he still united with his dreaminess. That it was partially a child's temper is shown by the fact that he himself can make fun of it afterwards, as he actually does in the first chapter of *News from Nowhere*.

It is recorded that on one occasion Morris wished certain friends to stay for some meal or other with him, and that they refused. One of them, however, forgot his umbrella, and, returning unexpectedly, discovered Morris rolling on the floor in a paroxysm of rage and biting the leg of the table. He was not careful to conceal his wrath from the public gaze, however. A well-known painter of the present day retains a terrifying impression of a glimpse of Morris striding up and down the platform at Earl's Court Station, quite alone and in a towering passion—his beard bristling, his face screwed up into an apple of wrinkled fire and working ferociously, his hands clenching and unclenching, and his lips moving as he talked or rather growled to himself. It has been said that he was of great physical strength; but it was not likely that a grown man torn with such passions could live very long, especially as he threw himself into his work with the same kind of intense nervous strain. Indeed, both his physical strength and his tempers were largely a matter of nerves. There was a decided neurotic tendency in

his ancestry; and his greatest feats of strength are often of a peculiar nature, such as making dents in a wall with his head or lifting a coal-scuttle with his teeth.

Making all due allowance for exaggeration in the well-authenticated stories that are told of him, enough remains to fit out Colney Hatch itself with legends. It is on this neurotic strain in Morris's nature that the biographer, making an impartial diagnosis, must lay his finger, as on the primary cause of the very few weaknesses of his life and work, and probably of his premature death. It is not a subject upon which it is necessary to dwell here, for it is impossible to say how much of the very strength of his work did not also depend on his "nerve-excitability." It is astonishing, indeed, how long it has taken an age so practical as our own to understand that if a grain of sand can upset the workings of a highly-complicated machine, the supersensitive organisation of genius is not less liable to disaster amid the rough and ready dealings of the world.

It was obvious that Morris would not long be contented with a London life, and accordingly in 1871 we find him going down to see a place on the banks of the upper Thames, which he had picked out of a London house-agent's list. This was Kelmscott Manor House, destined to be a home of exquisite peace and joy to him for the next twenty-five years.

> God gave all men all earth to love,
> But since man's heart is small,
> Ordained for each one spot should prove
> Beloved over all.

And it was there, on the banks of the upper Thames, that the "sure magic" was to strike for Morris, till memory, use, and love gave one life to himself and his fields. Eleven years later he wrote: "It has come to be to me the type of the pleasant places of the earth, and of the homes of harmless, simple people not overburdened with the intricacies of life; *and as others love the race of man through their lovers or their children, so I love the earth through that small space of it.*"

The words we have italicised show a great insight into his own character. For Morris, though a very lovable man in one sense, was a man who received rather than gave love. He understood the passions and he understood the senses; but he was almost too independent and self-sufficing to understand the human affections. His love was more for the places where he could "find himself." There is a strange inverted and dreamlike pathos, as of the ghost of Browning's lover of trees, in that wonderful description of Kelmscott Manor House, which shines out of the last pages of *News from Nowhere* like a great mass of earthly roses seen by a stolen human child through the ivory gates of fairyland.

Having installed his wife and children at Kelmscott in the midsummer of 1871, Morris himself did not settle down there immediately. The call of the sagas of Iceland was ringing in his ears. He had begun to think that the heroic stories of Iceland were among the very highest achievements of literature, in their tragic force and grandeur; and he had set his mind on making a journey through the island that summer. Accordingly, a party of four, Morris, Mr. Magnusson,

Faulkner, and a more recent acquaintance, Mr. W. H. Evans of Forde Abbey, Dorset, started from London on an expedition which perhaps impressed Morris more deeply than anything in his later life. The journey through the island was an adventurous one in those days, and was taken with guides and a string of pack-horses, carrying tents and food. An extract from one of his letters will suggest to the reader what great and terrible things were surging through the mind of the future author of *Sigurd the Volsung* on this journey :

> There has been but little roughing it, and I find sleeping in a tent very comfortable, even when the weather is very cold. . . . Last Thursday week we had a very bad day riding over the wilderness in the teeth of a tremendous storm of snow, rain, and wind. . . . I have seen many marvels and some terrible pieces of country ; slept in the home-field of Wyat's house, and the place where Bolli was killed, and am now a half hour's ride from where Gudrun died. I was there yesterday, and from its door you see a great sea of terrible inky mountains tossing about ; there has been a most wonderful sunset this evening that turned them golden, though.

Again, he wrote of Grettir's lair on the Fairwood fells : "Such a savage and dreadful place that it gave quite a new turn in my mind to the whole story, and transfigured Grettir into an awful and monstrous being, like one of the early giants of the world." The Geysers, which Morris regarded with some indignation as being the chief feature of Iceland to tourists who had never heard of Sigurd and Brynhild and Gudrun, nevertheless had an eerie effect upon him with their boiling mud and quivering earth. "Near our camp," says Mr. Evans, "there were several deep holes of beautiful still,

blue, boiling water: it was in these holes we boiled our fish and fetched our hot water; but after we had each been several times, Morris, on returning from one of these expeditions, said it was so uncanny he could not go again." Among the horrible mountains of the waste, indeed, where they explored the great cave of Surtshellir, Morris was almost overwhelmingly impressed with the terrors and desolations and glories of the land, and the effect on his imagination is seen very plainly in the marvellous pictures of the desert mountain journeys in *The Story of the Glittering Plain* and *The Well at the World's End.*

Immediately after his return from Iceland, Morris set to work on the composition of *Love is Enough*, and also took up the art of illumination in his leisure hours. This Masque or "Morality" Play of *Love is Enough* is one of the most elaborate experiments in poetical technique ever attempted in English, and a final proof, if any were needed, that Morris did not err on the side of too little craftsmanship. It has a peculiar interest to which we shall return in the last chapter. But the poem lacks vitality, and is dull to read for the most part. The story is taken from the *Mabinogion*; but the best portions of it — the lyrical interludes — are curiously mystical for Morris, who loved lucidity and definite form. Their charm and haunting melody is undeniable, but, as a whole, the poem is not a success; and the fact is probably due to the presence in Morris's mind of the larger Icelandic themes which were beginning to take shape and absorb his poetic strength. This is borne out by the curious preoccupied discontent which he showed with almost everything he saw on his

short visit to Italy in the spring of 1873. In July 1873, however, he made his second journey to Iceland, and felt the fascination of its desolate places once more "with an almost sacramental solemnity."

"The glorious simplicity of the terrible and tragic but beautiful land, with its well-remembered stories of brave men, killed all querulous feeling in me," he wrote, "and has made all the dear faces of wife and children and love and friends dearer than ever to me. I feel as if a definite space of my life had passed away now I have seen Iceland for the last time: as I looked up at Charles' Wain to-night, all my travel there seemed to come back to me, made solemn and elevated, in one moment, till my heart swelled with the wonder of it: surely I have gained a great deal, and it was no idle whim that drew me there, but a true instinct for what I needed."

And again:

Our guides were very pleasant, friendly fellows, as innocent of the great world as babies, and, apart from their daily labour, living almost entirely in the glorious past days of Iceland. One of them, Haldor by name, was born at Lithend, where Gunnar lived and died. I suppose I shall never see them again, and the days of these two journeys there have grown inexpressibly solemn to me.

In those days Morris was surely approaching, nearer than anywhere else in his life and work, to that

> Something far more deeply interfused,
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
> And the round ocean and the living air.

In 1875 he published a volume of translations from the Icelandic entitled *Three Northern Love Stories*, and in November of the same year his translations of the *Æneid* or, as he called it, *The Æneids* of Virgil. But

with these he was merely "marking time," in preparation for the supreme effort, perhaps the supreme success of all his literary work. His dyeing work occupied a great deal of his attention. His elder daughter in the summer of 1876 broke completely down in health, a trouble which weighed very much upon his mind.

But, in spite of his thousand preoccupations, his great work of this period was moving forward with the inevitable march of the seasons themselves, and in November 1876 Morris published *Sigurd the Volsung*. It was not well received by the public; but in this case he was not disappointed or disheartened, for he knew that he could not have done the work better.

CHAPTER VII

'SIGURD THE VOLSUNG'

WITH *Sigurd the Volsung* Morris himself believed that he had reached his highest mark of poetic achievement, and several of the better-qualified of his critics are inclined to agree with him. The poem has indeed been described as the greatest epic of the nineteenth century; but that may well be true without any necessity for ranking it above so complete an expression of his genius as *The Earthly Paradise*. It is possible that the view which would thus rank it is just as mistaken as that of the critics who go to the other extreme and affirm the early, immature, and indistinct lyrics of *The Defence of Guenevere* volume to be his finest work. It is possible, indeed, for *Sigurd the Volsung* to be, in a sense, the crown of Morris's work, without being his fullest and most completely satisfying individual achievement. Many a great bald mountain-top would lose its sublimity if bereft of the sweeping valley-slopes and fertile fields below, or laid, a mere slice of earth and stone, in the midst of a plain. And this, we think, is the case with the poem of *Sigurd*.

If it were all that Morris had left us, it would not be half so satisfactory as *The Earthly Paradise*. Yet,

as it stands, we do feel that it soars higher. It is cloudy in parts; but its clouds are magnificent, and through their rents we catch glimpses of an immensity of stars, and are conscious of a sweep of the heavens unknown in the valleys below.

In an age of cocksure assertion, when a hundred critics are ready to hail the latest school-girl's novel as a serious challenge to Balzac, the reader will perhaps pardon a method of criticism which may seem rather like "hedging" in this matter of *Sigurd the Volsung*. For it certainly is the most baffling poem of the last century. There are moments of enthusiasm when, with a sort of wild personal hope for our own age, we are inclined to say this poem is a far greater epic than *Paradise Lost*, that it ranks with the *Odyssey*, and that it is even more gloriously sustained in its level sublimity of flight. There are no passages of bathos as in Milton, no droppings into the ludicrous like that description of the cannonading angels begrimed with gunpowder. We have simply one of the greatest epic stories of the world told in a magnificent chant which sweeps over and through the whole universe.

It is not an archaic story as Morris tells it; for it deals with elemental things and the "mightier movement" sounding and passing, winds and stars and rivers, life and death. And then we begin to wonder how far its glory is derivative, how much Morris could have done without the old saga; and yet again, whether such debts as he does owe really matter in the long run; whether Milton's debt to the Old Testament were not as great; whether even Homer's debts were not as great; and whether Morris is perhaps the great blind

man who has touched this epic into life for all time. Certainly we may say, even of his debts, he owed little to anything in his own language; and what was given to him he has made fruitful and increased, pouring his own life into the Northern thoughts about man and God. They gave him an outlet in poetry, a release for all that was burning within him with regard to the social evils of his time. Yet he was far too great an artist to intrude any foreign element into the stories themselves. He was no longer the "idle singer of an empty day"; but the message of his work to his own time lay in his passionate joy in the clean clear splendour of the high heroic atmosphere, where he was now standing like a giant on a mountain, waving the torch of a great pine tree, as if beaconing modern men to see how all men might live free lives when their only oppressors were Fate and Death. Fate and Death still beleaguered his mind, but with a grander and sublimer gloom of battle, wherein he could rejoice like a warrior facing odds so mighty that defeat itself became magnificent. It was well indeed for the modern commercial world to have a poet who could show it on an epic scale the courage of our Northern ancestors against fate; the silent endurance of their heroes in sorrow and death and passion; their belief in dreams and a supernatural world; their fateful love; their deep humanity; the justice and honour of it all. What glorious suggestions of all this there are in that wonderful battle-picture of the death of King Volsung and his little host, when, trusting to the word of a traitor and disdaining to take any precautions or to heed any warning that would sully their own faith, they had been led into a

trap and surrounded by thousands. And when they came to the top of a certain grassy bent they saw the land all round them as thick with shield and spear as a fruitful land with the ears of corn ready for harvest. And King Volsung laughed and said, the Goth king does well to meet his guests by the way.

And there stood the high King Volsung in the very front of war ;
And lovelier was his visage than ever heretofore,
As he rent apart the peace-strings that his brand of battle bound
And the bright blade gleamed to the heavens, and he cast the sheath to the ground.

Then up the steep came the Goth-folk, and the spear-wood drew anigh,
And earth's face shook beneath them, yet cried they never a cry ;
And the Volsungs stood all silent, although forsooth at whiles
O'er the faces grown earth-weary would play the flickering smiles,
And swords would clink and rattle : not long had they to bide,
For soon that flood of murder flowed round the hillock-side ;
Then at last the edges mingled, and if men forbore the shout,
Yet the din of steel and iron in the grey clouds rang about ;
But how to tell of King Volsung, and the valour of his folk !
Three times the wood of battle before their edges broke ;
And the shield-wall, sorely dwindled and reft of the ruddy gold,
Against the drift of the war-blast for the fourth time yet did hold.
But men's shields were waxen heavy with the weight of shafts they bore,
And the fifth time many a champion cast earthward Odin's door
And gripped the sword two-handed ; and in sheaves the spears came on.
And at last the host of the Goth-folk within the shield-wall won,
And wild was the work within it, and oft and o'er again
Forth brake the sons of Volsung, and drave the foe in vain ;
For the driven throng still thickened, till it might not give aback.
But fast abode King Volsung amid the shifting wrack
In the place where once was the forefront : for he said : "My feet are old,
And if I wend on further there is nought more to behold

Than this that I see about me."—Whiles drew his foes away
And stared across the corpses that before his sword-edge lay.
But nought he followed after: then needs must they in front
Thrust on by the thickening spear-throng come up to bear the brunt,
Till all his limbs were weary and his body rent and torn:
Then he cried: "Lo now, Allfather, is not the swathe well shorn?
Wouldst thou have me toil for ever, nor win the wages due?"

The metre is one which in less expert hands than those of Morris might easily degenerate into doggerel. But here it is managed with marvellous skill. Never once through its hundreds of pages does it become monotonous; and there are subtle variations in the rhythmic beat which, though the comparison would have been odious to Morris himself, we can only say remind one of the curious thrill which one experienced in hearing certain passages of Wagner for the first time. With Morris's objections to the opera and his horror of a sandy-haired German tenor tweedle-deeing in the character of Sigurd it is possible to sympathise, and yet affirm as a compliment that his treatment of metre in this poem is something akin to Wagner's innovations in music. The long overlapping lines, the unending sea of song, swelling and dying and surging again like the wind in some mighty primæval pine-wood, touching us with sudden suggestions or wakening ancestral memories of billowing green and singing-birds and keen Northern scents, joyously shattered here and there by the golden echo of huntsmen's horns or the clash of battle, or barbarously torn by the savage jungle-cries of the elemental passions, these qualities of the music of the poem irresistibly remind us of some of Wagner's

greatest work. It is the nearest approach in our literature to that free music the dream of which has lured so many into mere chaos and formlessness or imitation of Whitman. Here the music has exquisite form, but its wings are as free as those of a bird. The beats change with absolute spontaneity just as the thought or emotion dictates; not, as in the so-called "free-verse" experiments, with abrupt and meaningless jerks or bumps suggesting that the poet is falling downstairs, or is perpetually being involved in sudden landslips, but with the natural and harmonious freedom and flexibility of organic life.

When Sigurd is loading his cloudy war-steed Greyfell with the golden treasure and arms of the Elf Andvari, having dragged them out from the lair of the serpent into the light of the desert moon, the Song of the Eagles breaks out above his toil and the clash of his armour among the rocks, with a change in the metre which to a reader uninterested in the science of verse would be perceptible only in its emotional effect and the glorious exultation of the repeated phrase or refrain at the opening of each couplet:

"Bind the red rings, O Sigurd! for the ways go green below,
Go green to the dwelling of Kings, and the halls that the Queen-folk know."

"Bind the red rings, O Sigurd! for what is there bides by the way,
Save the joy of folk to awaken, and the dawn of the merry day?"

And again, where Gunnar is cast with nothing but his harp into the pit of adders in the land without a road, the metre is full of the harp's warbling richness as he stands up to sing his death-song under the moon:—

Then he rose at once to his feet, and smote the harp with his hand,
And it rang as if with a cry in the dream of a lonely land ;
Then he fondled its wail as it faded, and orderly over the strings
Went the marvellous sound of its sweetness, like the march of
Odin's kings.

The climax and end of Gunnar's song, fading away as the harp falls from his hand, is a metrical masterpiece, and indeed a masterpiece in every way. Very wonderful, too, is the grim picture of the snakes (the reader will note the suggestive dropping of the lilt in the rhythm), momentarily lulled by the song :—

And the crests of the worms have fallen, and their flickering
tongues are still,
The Roller and the Coiler, and Greyback, lord of ill,
Grave-groper and Death-swaddler, the Slumberer of the Heath,
Gold-wallower, Venom-smiter, lie still, forgetting death,
And loose are coils of Long-back ; yea, all as soft are laid
As the kine in midmost summer about the elmy glade ;
—All save the Grey and Ancient, that holds his crest aloft,
Light-wavering as the flame-tongue when the evening wind is soft.

But perhaps the height of the poem, not excepting the tremendous battle in the Hall of Atli, is reached in the cry of Brynhild for the dead Sigurd after she has stabbed herself with her death-wound.

And she saith :

"I pray thee a prayer, the last word in the world I speak,
That ye bear me forth to Sigurd, and the hand my hand would seek ;
The bale for the dead is builded, it is wrought full wide on the
plain,
It is raised for Earth's best Helper, and thereon is room for twain :
Ye have hung the shields about it, and the Southland hangings
spread,
There lay me adown by Sigurd and my head beside his head :
But ere ye leave us sleeping, draw his Wrath from out the sheath,
And lay that Light of the Branstock, and the blade that frighted
death,

Betwixt my side and Sigurd's, as it lay that while agone,
When once in one bed together we twain were laid alone:
How then when the flames flare upward may I be left behind?
How then may the road he wendeth be hard for my feet to find?
How then in the gates of Valhall may the door of the gleaming ring
Clash to on the heel of Sigurd, as I follow on my king?"

Here, as in the great battle-scene which we quoted on a previous page, there is a new note in Morris's treatment of the subject of death. He has here beaten out his music with glorious results. Whatever defects the poem may have, certainly there are very few English poems during the latter half of the nineteenth century (and outside certain works of a very different kind by Browning and Tennyson) that, with anything like the same sweeping and sustained power attained to the sublime. Pathos there may be in philosophic resignation to death or in blind questioning of it. Tragedy there may be in the pity and terror of it. But, to adopt Ruskin's great question as to the difference between these emotions and the source of the sublime—"whether do we trace sublimity most in the cry to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us,' or in the calmness of the prophecy—'And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh I shall see God'?" Is not this heroic triumph written upon the smiling, earth-weary faces of the heroes in *Sigurd the Volsung*, or something so near it as to partake of its sublimity? It is perhaps conveyed to us more by the music and cadence and general spirit of the poem—as in some great symphony of Beethoven, rather than by any "array of terms." But one knows not where else to look for it in the poetry of his own period. Death was the subject that, whether he would or not, loomed largest and darkest in Morris's

mind. It was not a matter of mere artistic choice. He could not write of it except from the simplest and deepest part of his nature, and as a man approaching the mystery of the whole universe. In *Sigurd the Volsung* his heroic music conquers it, with a message to his own age, which had already passed beyond the faith of *The Ring and the Book* or *In Memoriam* to a drifting scepticism which needed something yet more elemental to arouse it; and it is this newly passionate and sublime music that makes the dry bones of the old saga live.

It has been said, notably by Mr. Mackail, that Morris marred the epic unity of his work by beginning it with the tale of Sigmund,

> ". . . It is as though the epic of Troy opened with a recital of the epic of Thebes. . . . The cannibal savagery of Tydeus, the incest of Œdipus and Jocasta, the living burial of Antigone, rouse a greater horror than anything in the Trojan story, but it is not one based on the same universal human sympathy. And so it is with the story of Sigmund; the wolf-change of the Volsung, the cruel, purposeless slaughter of Signy's children, the strangely inhuman life and death of the son of that awful brother and sister, are tragic indeed, but with such tragedy as belongs to the dim and monstrous reign of the older gods."

No matter with what skill Morris effected the transition, Mr. Mackail is of opinion that what he tried to do was wrong. But, though the objection is put with force, we believe Mr. Mackail is here on the wrong road. It is the old battle of the critics, poetry and academics, in a new form. The objection is precisely that which was levelled against *Hamlet* by the French critics of the eighteenth century. There was

no law pre-existent to the poem as to where it should begin or end.

The skill and the result alone are what we have to judge. And the result seems to us to be simply this—not an effect of two epics badly or artificially connected, but precisely that effect which is essential to all the greatest art. Had Morris omitted this earlier part of his epic he would have retained a clear, brilliant, and often splendid story of heroic deeds on this earth, and he would have omitted not another and a discordant story on the same earth-level, but the skies of his picture, the terrible and magnificent cloud-wrack, its infinite distances, and its eternal mystery. The effect of the first part of his epic on a reader without preconceived theories is rather like that of slowly awakening into a new world. There is some little while of travelling through strange twilit mountains, haunted by terrible and colossal suggestions of the powers and forces beyond that new world, and we come into the lucid brilliance of the story of Sigurd, "not in entire forgetfulness, and not in utter nakedness," but trailing the clouds of these glories and terrors. It seems to us beyond question that this was Morris's intention, and that the poem would have lost incalculably if it had been treated otherwise. Mr. Mackail adduces, in support of his view, the fact that Morris found it best to end with the death of Gudrun, while the saga-writer "goes pitilessly on" till the story relapses into something of its old horror and savagery. We do not quite see the force of this as an argument that Morris discovered himself to be wrong about the opening. The most convincing proof of his real intention is the fact that Morris does

not really end with the death of Gudrun. She is merely the last figure painted into the picture. There is an infinite distance behind her, a tremendous vision of the universe and the forces at work in it. With consummate art Morris has thrown this horizon around her, corresponding to the horizon at the beginning of the poem, by means of the comparatively brief but extraordinarily suggestive death-song of Gunnar which immediately precedes the death of Gudrun. So that when she leapt away from the earth and the sea-waves swept over her, it is with more glorious things even than the "stars and sea-winds in her raiment" that the Night comes down upon the immeasurable deep that hides her, and "the wealth of her bed, and the days that yet shall be."

CHAPTER VIII

SOCIALISM—THE THAMES POLICE COURT—'NEWS FROM NOWHERE'

A FEW months after the publication of *Sigurd the Volsung*, Morris was offered the Oxford Professorship of Poetry; but refused it first on the ground that he had doubts whether the professor of a wholly incommunicable art is not in a false position; and secondly—contradicting himself somewhat—on the ground that the Professorship was merely an ornamental honour. However, Oxford had done its duty; and it seems a little irreconcilable of Mr. Mackail to feed the old schoolboyish feud by his not very kind gibe at the subsequent appointment of Mr. Shairp.

In the meantime, however, Morris was busy forming the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (the "Antiscrape"), and in aiding the "Eastern Question Association" with money and work. His activities in connection with these movements led respectively to his later lecturing work and his direct support of socialism. To follow out all the ramifications of his public activities at this time would hardly fall within the scope of this volume. But it is necessary to point out that his socialism was the slow,

inevitable outcome of his artistic sincerity—it was forced upon him as an artist by the conditions of modern life. He did not approach it through a sense of pity for individuals. "Did you ever notice," said Rossetti once, "that Top never gives a penny to a beggar." Rossetti himself was always ready to empty his pockets for any immediate distress in the streets. Morris saw the matter on a larger scale, and from quite a different point of view; we might almost say from an almost entirely artistic—though ultimately not less sympathetic point of view. Just as he revolted against the ugliness of furniture and wall-papers in his earlier days, he revolted now against the ugliness of society. He was infuriated alike with the yells of ruffianism and the shrieks of the filthy bye-lanes. The brutal faces that passed him in the streets filled him with loathing. It was only afterwards, by a reasoning process, that his sense of pity was roused to realise that

> It was my good luck only that has put me on this side of the window among delightful books and lovely works of art, and not on the other side, in the empty street, the drink-steeped liquor-shops, the foul and degraded lodgings. I know by my own feelings and desires what these men want, what would have saved them from this lowest depth of savagery: employment which would foster their self-respect and win the praise and sympathy of their fellows, and dwellings which they could come to with pleasure, surroundings which would soothe and elevate them; reasonable labour, reasonable rest. There is only one thing that can give them this—Art.

So he said in an address, delivered in 1881, and on the same occasion he showed very strikingly the con-

nection of these thoughts with his love of the Middle Ages:—

> I am just fresh from an out-of-the-way part of the country near the end of the navigable Thames, where within a radius of five miles are some half-a-dozen tiny village churches, every one of which is a beautiful work of art. These are the works of the Thames-side country bumpkins, as you would call us—nothing grander than that. If the same sort of people were to design and build them now, they could not build anything better than the ordinary little plain Nonconformist chapels that one sees scattered about new neighbourhoods. That is what they correspond with, not an architect-designed new Gothic church. . . . What we have left us of earlier art was made by the unhelped people. Neither will you fail to see that it was made intelligently and with pleasure. . . . Time was when everybody that made anything made a work of art besides a useful piece of goods, and it gave them pleasure to make it.

Morris's socialism, in brief, was the gospel of the joy of life. A few mistakes he made in details, chiefly with regard to the best kinds of joy. But with the elements of Morris's socialism it is hardly possible for any one of intelligence to disagree at the present day. Consistently with the way in which he approached it, his socialism was as much on behalf of the rich as on behalf of the poor. "How can it be otherwise," he wrote, "when to me society seems mere cannibalism; nay, worse, is grown so corrupt, so steeped in hypocrisy and lies, that one turns from one stratum of it to another with hopeless loathing."

His dissatisfaction with the socialists was as marked as that which he felt with any other body. One of the greatest friends of his later life tells me that at the very time when Morris was in the thick of

the struggle, he often expressed the private opinion to him that it was better left alone. "We are artists, my dear fellow, and we had better be doing our own work." Probably he was strengthened in this opinion, without giving up one jot or tittle of his deeper socialism (dream within dream as ever), by the fact that many socialists began to congregate about him whose socialism consisted only in the idea that Morris should share his money with them. His irreconcilability to any phase of the existing scheme of civilisation, and even to socialism itself, is exquisitely typified in the extraordinary dialogue which took place between a magistrate and himself at the Thames Police Court.

Some socialists had been arrested for obstructing a public thoroughfare, and the magistrate sentenced one of them to two months' hard labour. There was a hubbub in the court, hisses and cries of "Shame!" Morris was present and joined in these, and, in the general hustling involved in the restoration of order, he was arrested and charged on the spot with striking a policeman. This is the curious and not altogether pleasing dialogue that followed, as reported by Mr. Mackail :—

Magistrate. What are you?
Prisoner. I am an artist and a literary man, pretty well known, I think, throughout Europe.
Magistrate. I suppose you did not intend to do this?
Prisoner. I never struck him at all.
Magistrate. Well, I will let you go.
Prisoner. But I have not done anything.
Magistrate. Well, you can stay if you like.
Prisoner. I don't want to stay.

He was discharged and left the court, having given the gadflies of the world an opportunity by his piece of

hasty self-assertion, which was obviously of the same neurotic origin as his outbursts of temper.

His literary work falls into abeyance during these years of storm and stress when he was founding the Socialist League, appearing at the Thames Police Court, editing the *Commonweal*. However, in 1887 he published a translation of the *Odyssey*, which is perhaps not Homer, but the nearest to him that we have come in English verse translation.

In 1888, he was playing a great part in the founding of the Arts and Crafts Society; and Ruskin, the source of much in Morris's social and artistic theories, wrote thanking him for being the only person who went "straight to the accurate point of the craftsman's question. How much good," he added, "might be done by the establishment of an exhibition anywhere, in which the Right doing, instead of the Clever doing, of all that men know how to do, should be the test of acceptance."

The Dream of John Ball appeared in March 1888. It is a picture of English society when the feudal system was coming to an end, and Morris contrasts it with English society at the present day, closing with a faint suggestion and vague hope of what it might yet come to be. It has been well said that it does not take much trouble to be a socialist now, and it does not bring with it now much sacrifice. But Morris both took and suffered trouble. He sacrificed money, health, peace, his beloved work, his passion for beauty in literature and art, to his convictions, and for nearly four years of unremitting toil. What the changed world was to be he tried to paint in *News from Nowhere*, and by this time he was beginning to think it could only come through some

violent revolution such as he depicts in that book. The circulation of this volume, which in 1890 was published cheaply in paper covers, was very large. It has been translated into all the chief European languages. The great success of the book, despite its dreamlike pastoral atmosphere (an admirable corrective to the machine-made social systems of other modern Utopias), is one of the most hopeful signs for the progress of the higher socialism. It would be futile here to criticise Morris's theories as to the ways and means of carrying on his communistic society. The present generation has left them far behind; and so would Morris himself if he had lived to elaborate his ideas. He could do no more at that early stage than suggest makeshift devices; and they must be taken as signposts, not as goals. In one of his lectures, for instance, in answer to the question, "How will you sail a ship in a socialist condition?" he answers: "With a captain and mates and sailing-master and engineer (if it be a steamer) and stokers, and so on. *Only* there will be no first, second, and third-class among the passengers; the sailors and stokers will be as well fed and lodged as the captain or passengers; and the captain and the stoker will have the same pay." Now, as a signpost that is all very well, but some of the points in it could be knocked down like ninepins at the present day. If one wished to be ribald, for instance, one might suggest that to make things perfectly equal between captain and stokers, the captain should do a little tread-mill exercise on the deck every evening, and should afterwards be boiled for three-quarters of a minute in a large pudding-cloth. To make matters equal between the stokers (who are engaged upon their

work) and the passengers (who *might* be on their holidays) we cannot think that food and lodging would suffice. There should be hammocks in the engine-room and furnaces under the deck-chairs. Moreover, the question of payment would not arise at all in the communistic state which Morris desired ; and, as he expressly says that special gifts or talents would not occur to make things unequal in a state where all men would be absolutely free to choose their own occupations, it is not obvious why so many men should prefer stoking to captaincy, for presumably there would still be only one captain to many stokers. But it is useless to criticise a system which, literally, means the substitution of death for life. Life itself depends, throughout the whole universe, just as music or painting depends, on grades and distinctions of notes and colours. Dissolution has no other meaning than that return to indifferent homogeneity, dust to the dust, which is involved in many of Morris's theories. And he himself felt this, insisted upon what he called " variety of life," and so continually found himself entangled in violent contradictions. *News from Nowhere* happily does not depend on his theories any more than his poetry depends upon single great lines. Here, as before, the beauty of the book is in its atmosphere. But there is no more hopelessly illogical book in the language. There is something of the marvellously feminine method of *The Defence of Guenevere* in it. It marvellously suggests the right road, even while hopelessly contradicting itself. And while the writer is wrapping himself up more and more desperately in his own tangle of errors, he is able to cry out with passionate and perfect truth to the upholders of the present system :

"Nevertheless you, O Sir Gauwaine, lie!"

The naïveté of some of his Utopian conceptions is extraordinary. He falls asleep in winter, and awakes to find not only that the old dingy Hammersmith has disappeared, but that the season is summer. We cannot take this as symbolism or mere accident. It is the very type of the fallacies with which the book abounds. Morris was a summer poet, and he did subconsciously abolish the seasons from his new Arcadia. Following upon this kind of fallacy, we note that wherever he goes with his guide every one is at his own service. They are on a pleasure trip, yet when they come upon people engaged in work, it is the workers who are delayed in their tasks in order to prevent the most trifling delays in the pleasure journey—such as a momentary dismounting from their vehicle. Morris evades this, of course, by abolishing the distinction between work and pleasure, but his method of doing so is not one that would tend to encourage the others. He compares the jollity of the gang of road-makers with that of an "eight" of Oxford oarsmen; but if he were a rowing man, he would know that even oarsmen are never particularly anxious to be "held up" by punts or boat-loads of trippers, and that their methods of helping these last along might not be loud, but would certainly be deep. The Utopia where a 'Varsity crew, coxed by a lightly-clad maiden, would "hold her all" (in the technical sense), help a picnic party out of their boats and politely hand them their bottles and cold salmon up the bank, is perhaps the wildest of all Morris's amiable dreams. The whole book is pervaded by the same fallacious method of

treating a complex matter, where two or more parties are concerned, as if it were simple and quite one-sided. We have pointed out that this applies also to his treatment of the human affections. He really did not understand them; and indeed this is the only way to account for the extraordinary love-story of Dick and Clara in *News from Nowhere*. These two curious creations of dreamland have been living together and have two children. A whim of the lady's suddenly makes her think she might have done better. She abandons the man with whom she has been living and their two children, sacrificing three genuine affections to her own transient fancy, lives with another man for a short time, grows tired of that, and eventually returns to Dick, the two children in the meantime having been conveniently left in somebody else's charge. This is the way in which Dick receives her announcement that she wishes him to take her back for the haymaking. "Will I not?" said Dick, somewhat boisterously. "And we will manage to send you to bed pretty tired every night; and you will look so beautiful with your neck all brown, and your hands too, and you under your gown as white as privet, that you will get some of those strange discontented whims out of your head, my dear." And so these limply organised creatures moon along through the story in a sensuous mist of complete selfishness, though the lady's "whim" was not even justified by any advantage to herself, it appears in the end. She combines disloyalty with idiocy so successfully that we have little wonder at the suggestion that there was a danger of Dick developing a similar "whim" for another thinly-clad lady immediately after the return of the

first. But this blew over. Surely, if ever laws or, at the very least, "public opinion" were necessary, though it were only in the guise of running lines, they would be necessary for just such feather-headed, bubble-chasing infants as these.

The predominance which Morris gives throughout the book to the transient pleasure of the senses is the rock upon which the goodwill of many of the best kinds of thoughtful people must inevitably split, when reading *News from Nowhere*. There is not a single instance in the book where old age in a woman is tolerated. We presume that the old women in his Arcadia were all smothered when their first wrinkle appeared; since all the old men are surrounded by beautiful young girls, always very lightly clad, and ready to kiss and have their smooth arms stroked and so forth. Even the gang of road-menders had a bevy of lightly-clad damsels lying on the grass beside them in delicious attitudes. It would be farcical if it were not for the high aims and glorious ideals which seem doomed to be hampered by this cancer in the throat of socialism—this curse of a petty and ludicrously superficial trifling with complex sex matters, which provides the enemies of progress with a weapon forged in the strongest fires of human nature, a weapon far more invincible than the Wrath of Sigurd. Morris's error here is precisely that of which we have spoken before. Just as, without knowing it, he would abolish the seasons, and dissolve the organisation of a steamboat, so he would dissipate all the higher elaborations of life, its loyalties, its chivalries, its memories, its homes, into a homogeneous sensuous mist. There could be no hell like it—this world where hardly anything

matters any more, except superficial sense-pleasure; where there is nothing to fight for, no right and no wrong, no black and no white; a glittering plain, a world without form and void, because it is drawn in gold upon gold and you cannot even see its outlines. Poverty is no more, he says, but it is really wealth that is no more in his Utopia. The rich, indeed, would in many cases be better off than they were before; but the thief upon the cross would still be a wealthy man compared with any in that new Arcadia. If Morris could have taken the "submerged" poor of England out of their hovels, the labourers out of their cottages, and the thread-bare middle-classes out of their pinched home-villas, if he could have set them down, under the conditions of his new world, among the golden groves of that *Earthly Paradise*, there would have come a cry, not out of ignorance or lack of education, but out of the deepest and most sacred well-springs of human nature:

> Give back the Babylon where I was born,
> The lips that gape give back, the hands that grope,
> And noise and blood and suffocating scorn,
> An eddy of fierce faces—and a hope
>
> That mid those myriad heads one head find place
> With brown hair curled like breakers of the sea,
> And two eyes set so strangely in the face
> That all things else are nothing suddenly.

CHAPTER IX

HALL-BLITHE'S RETURN

MORRIS himself, as we have pointed out before, was not blind to the contradictions of his position. It had been obvious from the first that his point of view was essentially different from that of most socialists of his own day. There is something very touching in the instinct which led him, towards the end of his wanderings through the changed world of Nowhere, to happen upon his own home—unchanged; to wander back into it, even against his will, and to draw that exquisite picture of Kelmscott Manor, as seen from fairyland itself by a stolen human child.

> We saw before us a bank of elm trees, which told us of a house amidst them, though I looked in vain for the grey walls that I expected to see there. As we went, the folk on the bank talked indeed, mingling their kind voices with the cuckoo's song, the sweet strong whistle of the blackbirds, and the ceaseless note of the corncrake as he crept through the long grass of the mowing-field; whence came waves of fragrance from the flowering clover amidst the ripe grass.
>
> In a few minutes we had . . . beached our craft . . . and mounting on the cart-road that ran along the river some feet above the water, I looked round about me. The river came down through a wide meadow on my left, which was

grey now with the ripened seeding grasses; the gleaming water was lost presently by a turn of the bank. . . .

Almost without my will my feet moved on along the road they knew . . . and again almost without my will my hand raised the latch of the door in the wall, and we stood. . . . The garden between the wall and the house was redolent of the June flowers, and the roses were rolling over one another with that delicious superabundance of small well-tended gardens which at first sight takes away all thought from the beholder save that of beauty. The blackbirds were singing their loudest, the doves were cooing on the roof-ridge, the rooks in the high elm trees beyond were garrulous among the young leaves, and the swifts wheeled whining about the gables. And the house itself was a fit guardian for all the beauty of this heart of summer.

What went ye out into the wilderness to see, his heart seems to cry; and the answer comes almost fiercely, with surely something more than a suggestion of Hall-blithe's discontent with the Land of the Glittering Plain:

"Yes, friend, this is what I came out for to see; this many-gabled old house built by the simple country-folk of the long-past times, regardless of all the turmoil that was going on in cities and courts, is lovely still amidst all the beauty which these latter days have created; and I do not wonder at our friends tending it carefully and making much of it. It seems to me as if it had waited for these happy days, and held in it the gathered crumbs of happiness of the confused and turbulent past."

There, at Kelmscott Manor, he came back to his beloved realms of romance, with the *House of the Wolfings*, published in December 1888. In this book, written with prose for the main narrative and rolling verse for the purple passages, he returns to the epic world of *Sigurd the Volsung*, and holds up once more, as a poet

and artist, the great ideals of a youthful state close to the heart of nature. In the *Roots of the Mountains* he does this even more effectively. The love of nature wells up again in this tale; and the exquisite descriptions of wood and meadow, valley and mountain, stream and fell, are perhaps lovelier than anything from any other hand in our prose literature. In February of the same year was finished the Arras tapestry of the "Adoration of the Kings," which now hangs at Oxford in Exeter College Chapel, a rich memory of beauty for generation after generation of those that sit beneath it. Morris's own opinion of this piece of work shows that the occasion was one of those rare ones when the artist himself is completely satisfied. "Nothing better of the kind," he said, "had ever been done, old or new." It is not only of rare beauty in itself, we may add, but it is also the most perfect figure or symbol of Morris's own art at its highest and best. We shall touch upon this in the concluding chapter. It is pleasant to think that this exquisite work is the pride of his old College.

In the spring of that year he published *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, perhaps the most beautiful of all his prose romances. In this, like a child turning home, he comes back completely and whole-heartedly to the dreamland of his youth. But there is a deeper note in its yearning for the continuing city which, with the Middle Ages for his form of style, he was ever endeavouring to raise for himself above the beatings of the steely sea of time. The old refrain of *The Earthly Paradise* breaks out again with even greater poignancy as, like shadowy premonitions hurrying through his

mind, those three strange world-weary men, types of old age, come riding through the home of Hall-blithe, in Cleveland-by-the-Sea.

Two of them were old and feeble, and the third was dark and sad, and drooping of aspect: it seemed as if they had ridden far and fast, for their spurs were bloody and their horses all asweat.

Hall-blithe hailed them kindly and said: "Ye are way-worn, and maybe ye have to ride further; so light down and come into the house and take bite and sup." . . .

Then spake the oldest of the elders in a high piping voice and said: "Young man, we thank thee; but though the days of the spring-tide are waxing, the hours of our lives are waning; nor may we abide unless thou canst truly tell us that this is the Land of the Glittering Plain: and if that be so, then delay not, lead us to thy lord, and perhaps he will make us content."

Spake he who was somewhat less stricken in years than the first: "Thanks have thou! but we need something more than meat and drink, to wit the Lord of Living Men. And oh! but the time presses." . . .

Then they all three cried aloud and said:

"Is this the Land? Is this the Land?"

Still, with a kind of hope that this might indeed be the land, Morris quietly and steadily supported the Hammersmith Socialist Society, carried on his increasing business, and invented new labours of love for himself. The most famous of these last was the Kelmscott printing-press.

"I wish I had been a printer from my mother's womb," he says, with characteristic fierceness. The first book printed was his own *Story of the Glittering Plain*; the second, *Poems by the Way* (1891); and the greatest achievement of the press, the Kelmscott Chaucer, his work of love for his great dead master, his master still,

was beginning to take shape in his mind. The glorious books turned out from his press were a source of never-ceasing delight to him; and he gave them away as generously to his friends as if they all indeed lived in the land of *News from Nowhere*. The Chaucer was for five years in project, and for three years in preparation. The printing occupied a year and nine months. It contained eighty-seven pictures by Burne-Jones, a full-page woodcut title, fourteen large borders, eighteen borders for the pictures, and many ornamented initial words and letters designed by Morris himself. His own copy of the book is now in the library of Exeter College, Oxford. The Kelmscott Chaucer was his last work. Before its conclusion he was manifestly failing in strength, and his anxiety to get the book finished was a pathetic sign that he was not unaware of the shortness of the time that remained. A visitor, looking over the sheets on his table one day, remarked on the greater beauty of those in the second part. Morris immediately exclaimed, "Now don't you go saying that to Burne-Jones, or he'll be wanting to do the first part over again; and the worst of that would be, that he'd want to do all the rest over again, because the other would be so much better, and then we should never get done!"

Some time after the death of Tennyson in 1892, Morris was sounded by a member of Mr. Gladstone's Cabinet as to whether he would accept the Laureateship in the event of its being offered to him. "He was frankly pleased," says Mr. Mackail, "that he had been thought of," but his views did not permit him to accept the offer. This "was not the land."

In 1896 he was ordered a sea voyage, and was taken

to look once more on the old hills which the eyes of the old men looked on when they did their best against the Weirds. On the 8th of September, after his return, he dictated the last dozen lines of *The Sundering Flood.* His fear of death had apparently left him, but he desired very much to live. Just before he died, Mr. Arnold Dolmetsch brought a pair of virginals to Kelmscott House and played to him several pieces of the older music which he loved, by English composers of the sixteenth century. The voices of the dead were calling to him out of his havens of rest and out of his beloved past. "At the opening phrase," says Mr. Mackail, "he broke into a cry of joy, and after the two pieces had been repeated at his request, was so deeply stirred that he could not bear to hear any more."

With a wonderful old book beside him, a *Bible Historiée et Vie des Saints,* containing an unsurpassed wealth and beauty of ornament and one thousand and thirty-four pictures, he passed his last days in his old happy world. He stood once more amidst the snow outside those mediæval towers and listened while, like the cry of the virginals which broke him down, the wonderful old carol floated into the pure cold night:

> Queen Mary's crown was gold,
> King Joseph's crown was red,
> But Jesus' crown was diamond
> That lit up all the bed.
> *Mariæ Virginis.*

On the 3rd of October 1896 he died.

CHAPTER X

CONCLUSION

It is early yet to attempt to settle Morris's place among the poets, but certainly it is by his poetry that he will be chiefly remembered. His literary work is bewildering in its Balzacian quantity; and there is perhaps no poet whose work is so marvellously sustained in quality. The very worst of his writings bears upon it the unmistakable hall-mark of the artist; the poorest of his singing-robes will have some gold feather clinging to it that shows what paradisal floor it lately swept. In his early days, if the work be sometimes crude, it is with the interesting crudity of the infancy of art itself. If it is unconsciously humorous, it is with the unconscious humour of an "Anglo-Saxon attitude," or the stiff figures on a Bayeux tapestry. Morris was a curiously complete world of art in himself, and underwent a separate evolution. Dependent as his work seemed upon the past, he seemed also to begin everything anew, from poetry to woodcuts, from church-windows to wall-paper. And in regarding any portion of his work we always feel that it has an interest beyond itself, as being part of some great natural process or renascence, like the Spring.

It is with this feeling of the unity and continuity of his work that we may go into some little village church and be surprised by a sudden glow of colour from two or three of the simplest windows "designed by Burne-Jones and executed by William Morris." They may not be very completely representative of the two great artists; but from the glorious feather of beauty dropped there we know the wings of the angel. It is with the same feeling of unity that we trace his progress from Woodford Hall to Kelmscott Manor, or from that walled garden, with scarlet bricks and old grey stone in its walls, over which red apples shone at the right time of the year, to the home of Hall-blithe in Cleveland-by-the-Sea. He extended the boundaries of his world, but he never shifted its centre. Woodford Hall, with the scents of the May-tide in its garden, was at the back of all his works. It thrust itself up through his theories like the boughs of the Branstock through the hall of the Niblungs. More perhaps than any other English poet, and in more than one sense, Morris gives expression to that emotion which Tennyson called "the passion of the past." His own explanation of this in the sixteenth chapter of *News from Nowhere* is interesting:

"Are we not good enough to paint ourselves? How is it that we find the dreadful times of the past so interesting to us—in pictures and poetry?"

. . . . . .

"Well," said Dick, "surely it is but natural to like these things strange; just as when we were children, as I said just now, we used to pretend to be so-and-so in such-and-such a place." . . .

"Thou hast hit it, Dick; it is the childlike part of us

that produces works of imagination. When we are children time passes so slow with us that we seem to have time for everything."

He sighed, and then smiled and said: "At least let us rejoice that we have got back our childhood again."

In Morris this passion of the past is intense to the point of pain. It appears under many disguises. His Utopia of the past (for that is what it was, though he projected it into the future) was in many of its aspects hardly more than a lyrical cry for his own dead days. His tales of the Middle Ages are, as it were, remembered from a past of nearer date—a past in which he had himself lived. Woodford Hall was the nucleus of that "shadowy isle of bliss" which he was ever afterwards striving to build—for himself and for others—midmost the beatings of the world's bitter and steely sea. At Kelmscott Manor or on a tub at Hammersmith that was his only strife—to realise *The Earthly Paradise*. That we are justified in attempting to bring out these inner and almost subconscious meanings of his work is proved by a curious remark which in a moment of instinctive insight he actually made about *The Earthly Paradise*. "The title is the best part of it," he said, "and will have a meaning for men when the rest is forgotten." The remark puzzled his hearers, but its origin is clear. He felt that in the title a reconciliation was achieved between those things which in his work only seemed to lead him into self-contradictions. He thought that the sights and sounds and scents of the immediate May-time were all that he desired; and yet these, with the youth that seemed necessary to complete them, were ever passing

away. And yet again, when he imagined his immortal golden groves, he was filled with the discontent of Hallblithe in the Land of the Glittering Plain. The only philosophical utterance he ever made about the matter was practically to the effect that perhaps change and death were necessary or there would be no good stories. Yet, like a ship tacking between these two opposites, he did continuously keep to his right course, and even without knowing it he did show the necessity for the ultimate reconciliation implied in his title, *The Earthly Paradise.*

The wages of sin is death: if the wages of Virtue be dust,
Would she have heart to endure for the life of the worm and the fly?
She desires no isles of the blest, no quiet seats of the just,
To rest in a golden grove, or to bask in a summer sky:
Give her the wages of going on, and not to die.

So said Tennyson in his direct fashion; and so said Morris also in his own way. When he was brought face to face with the fact that he could not "make quick-coming death a little thing, or bring again the pleasure of past years," he turned instinctively to mediævalism as a permanent and definite form of style, beyond the reach of change, whereby he might embody what he loved and raise it above the beatings of that bitter sea. His mediævalism does not actually come nearer to the real life of the Middle Ages than does the unaffectedly modern speech of Tennyson's *Idylls.* Women's necks in the Middle Ages were not really longer or their feet thinner than they are to-day. Morris did adopt a convention for himself which will, finally, give him a lower, though not less secure, place than that of Tennyson in the roll of great poets. Tennyson did attempt and achieve the harder task, in grappling

directly with the intellectual problems of his own generation. That our own generation has in some ways outgrown those problems does not alter the fact that hereafter Tennyson will inevitably be regarded as the broadest and fullest voice of his own century. The creator of the *Northern Farmer* and the "fat-faced curate Edward Bull" is undoubtedly, among other things, the Chaucer of his own century, no matter how tired of that century we may have grown for the present. The poets who immediately followed him had their own great qualities, but escaped his dominance only by yielding the modern English language to him, and by speaking in tongues of their own invention. Whatever his faults may be, no matter how "old-fashioned" he may be (the first epithet of the real Philistia), Tennyson, in writing such lyrics as *Break, break, break*, or some of the sections of *In Memoriam*, had the courage of direct, sincere feeling and language. This is obviously imperilled by the more conscious artistry of the next generation, by the various altar-lights and stained windows of language or the polysyllabic penultimates that Rossetti loved, for instance, as well as by the "waters wan" and "garments thin" of the tongue of Morris. There is not the slightest doubt that it is easier to write as those poets wrote than as Wordsworth, Tennyson, or Browning. It is plain that Morris felt this ease when he declared that "inspiration" was a myth, and that all art was a matter of mere craftsmanship. No temporary reaction or disregard of literary history and origins, no pseudo-intellectual snobbery, even of the more pardonable kind which forgets the old story of the superior vision of dwarfs on the shoulders of giants, none of these things can alter the

fact which has already been decided by the greater world, the world that decided on a still larger scale about the position of Shakespeare. Tennyson is secure of his great chapter in all modern histories of our literature, or the histories themselves would be worthless. Tennyson, with his May-queen, his country parsons, his farmers and cobblers, his lotos-eaters and Œnones, his majestic chant of our "rough island story," his exquisite truth to nature, his honourable lucidity, his Vergilian perfection of language and of form; Tennyson, the voice of a century's awakening to the wonders of science and the wonder that yet should be; Tennyson, standing, a tower of strength, four-square to all the winds that blew, erect, while the faiths and creeds of eighteen hundred years crumbled around him into the godless deep; Tennyson, the voice of the agony of doubts and tragic dilemmas that we have forgotten, reigns in his great lovable simplicity and real kingliness of soul, supreme upon the throne of English poetry in the latter half of the nineteenth century. His treatment of landscape alone would give him this place, the master-poet of that England, as Turner was the master-painter. The opening pictures of *Œnone* and the *Lotos-Eaters* have only to be compared carefully with the work of any other modern poet to establish this. In one you may get a more sensuous chord of colour, in another a more fiery cloud of passion. You may get one-line or two-line pictures of one separate feature or another in sea or sky or plain. The rest will almost always be half-organised, chaotic, or kaleidoscopic. Then turn to Tennyson. Detail by detail in an unmatched logical and natural order the lucid pictures

rise, the hills and clouds take shape and flow into form by one and the same natural law; "the swimming vapour slopes athwart the glen, puts forth an arm and creeps from pine to pine," and is "blown upon the canvas." And one may search the wide world of poets in vain for anything like that certainty of vision, that natural and inevitable progression, that sureness of touch and completeness of conception. But this does not in any way detract from the great genius of Morris. Morris turned to the Middle Ages not as a mere æsthete seeking an anodyne, not as an æsthetic scholar composing skilful exercises, but as a child turns to fairyland. It was his own method of removing what he loved out of space and time in order to view it in the light of Eternity. He deliberately adopted the convention that made Troy a belfried town like Bruges or Chartres, because he felt that this, too, was a method of defying time, and that he had thus in some strange way the power of building himself a continuing city. He felt an altogether modern pleasure in the anachronism, a little shock of delight as he brought the facts of history into collision and resolved the resultant discord into harmony by a deeper note. He felt a peculiarly modern pleasure as his fabled cities rose to music, and the Trojan princes rode out to tilt like the knights of Froissart, or leaned out across the moat of Woodford Hall to see

> the carp and tench,
> In spite of arblasts and petrariæ,
> Suck at the floating lilies all day long.

And while this pleasure separates him from Chaucer on the one hand, there is a depth of sincere feeling, a passionate desire, a reality of self-expression in all his

work which differentiates it entirely from that of the perverse and paradoxical æsthetes who followed him. It is this that lifts his work, not in great single thoughts or passages, but in its whole wistful atmosphere, to the level of high poetry. It is filled with the light of that Eternity which his lower "scale of values" seemed to prevent him from seeing that he was always subconsciously attempting to fathom. It is an ultimate and absolute reconciliation that he seeks in his theoretical Utopias and in his poetical *Earthly Paradises.* His socialism and his art are united in one prayer as are the cries—*Thy will be done on earth,* and *Give us this day our daily bread.* First and last, art is religion; and Morris's art rightly included socialism. There is no room in it for preciosity; no room in it for anything but the Eternal. Poetry itself has no other meaning or aim than that reconciliation which is implied in the title of *The Earthly Paradise,* that suffusion of common things with the light that never was on sea or land. Morris's instinctive shrinking from any attempt to tell of "the things whereof man knoweth nought" was not a sign of blindness. He clung to definite form, knowing that otherwise his art would be drowned in infinity. He was content to be as a little child in those matters; and, indeed, his artistic energies are most perfectly figured by that exquisite tapestry of the three kings kneeling before the Christ-child with their gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. In the one poem—*Love is Enough*—wherein he does venture to lose himself in light, there are many remarkable attempts to bring back to us the gospel of what he had seen beyond earth's bourne. Love comes before the curtain first as a maker of images, then as a

maker of pictured cloths, then with a cup of bitter drink and his hands bloody, then as a pilgrim, and lastly with a crown and a palm-branch. "Have faith, and crave and suffer," he cries, "and all ye the many mansions of my house shall see."

> Fear not, I say again; believe it true
> That not as men mete shall I measure you. . . .
>
> What sign, what sign, ye cry, that so it is?
> The sign of Earth, its sorrow and its bliss,
> Waxing and waning, steadfastness and change;
> Too full of life that I should think it strange
> Though death hang over it; *too sure to die*
> *But I must deem its resurrection nigh.*

"Fear not," is Morris's last word on the matter; for who shall say how soon the day will come "that swalloweth up the sea"; and the ransomed of Love shall return with their memories ever fresh and green, to dwell in that house of many mansions.

> And if, the while ye toiled and sorrowed most,
> The sound of your lamenting seemed all lost,
> And from my land no answer came again,
> It was because of that your care and pain
> A house was building, and your bitter sighs
> Came hither as toil-helping melodies,
> And in the mortar of our gem-built wall
> Your tears were mingled mid the rise and fall
> Of golden trowels tinkling in the hands
> Of builders gathered wide from all the lands.—
> Is the house finished? Nay, come help to build. . . .

And for the builders on this earth his message is, in its own form, at one with the cry of all the prophets and seers:

> Love is enough: ho ye who seek saving,
> Go no further; come hither; there have been who have found it
> And these know the House of Fulfilment of Craving;
> These know the Cup with the roses around it;

These know the World's Wound and the balm that hath bound it :
Cry out, the World heedeth not, "Love, lead us home!"
. . . . . .
O hearken the words of his voice of compassion :
"Come cling round about me, ye faithful who sicken
Of the weary unrest and the world's passing fashion !
As the rain in mid-morning your troubles shall thicken,
But surely within you some Godhead doth quicken,
As ye cry to me heeding, and leading you home."

What is all this but the gold and frankincense and myrrh of his three kings? In every line that Morris wrote he was helping on earth to build that distant continuing City whose first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third a chalcedony, the fourth an emerald. There was no preciosity in his choice of the Middle Ages as his "form of style." He turned to them as world-weary men turn to their own childhood, knowing perhaps that except as a little child in glittering armour he could not enter into his Kingdom of Heaven. His abiding city was not and never could be here. His work is suffused with the eternal light of that vision of an ultimately reconciled and ransomed world to which Shelley attained and Keats was climbing when he murmured "Beauty is truth, truth beauty!" —the vision shadowed forth in sign and symbol by all the prophets of all the ages; the unconquerable and inviolable hope of mankind, that the desert and solitary place shall at last break into singing, and the wilderness blossom as the rose, and sorrow and sighing flee away.

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